

*The Rotunda and the surrounding area C. 1955 (From the archive of G. Lycides).*



THEOCHARIS PAZARAS

THE ROTUNDA  
OF SAINT GEORGE  
IN THESSALONIKI



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## TOPOGRAPHY

At the junction of Apostolou Pavlou Street and Philippou Street, about 100 m. up from the Arch of Galerius, stands the Rotunda of St. George, one of the oldest and most imposing monuments in Thessaloniki (pl. 1 and 2).

The Rotunda was once part of a large complex of buildings in and around the present-day Navarinou and Ippodromiou Squares; this complex also included the palace, an octagonal structure, and the hippodrome—all of which were built by the Caesar Galerius during the First Roman Tetrarchy (c. AD 300) when he established his seat in Thessaloniki.

The results of Ejnar Dyggve's excavations led him to conclude that the group of buildings constructed by Galerius were based on a homogeneous, planned design (fig. 1). To the north of the palace and the hippodrome stands a triumphal arch, which—as its reliefs show—was constructed in celebration of Galerius's victorious campaign in the East in AD 297. The arch was originally composed of eight huge piers in two parallel rows, and three archways were

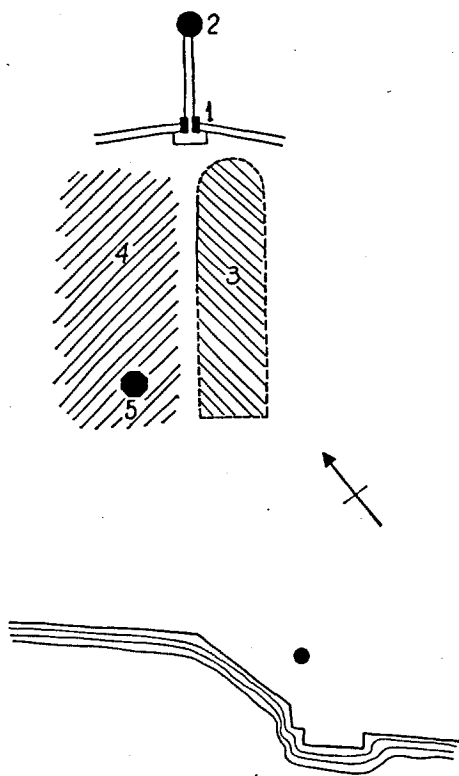


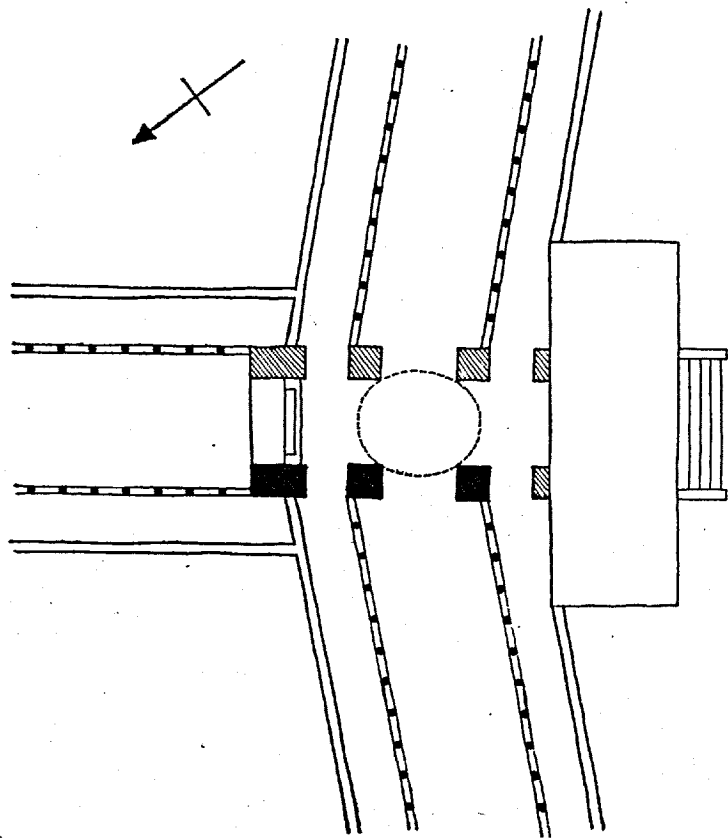
Fig. 1. The group of buildings constructed by Galerius. 1. Arch, 2. Rotunda, 3. Hippodrome, 4. Palace, 5. Octagonal structure.

formed in each row, the middle arch being higher than the others. The centre of the structure was covered by a hemispherical dome resting on pendentives on the arches joining the four central piers. The sections at either end were covered by barrel vaults (fig. 2). All that remains today of the whole monument are three of the west piers with their low north arch and higher central arch. It was because of the latter that the old Thessalonians gave the monument the name «Kamara» (arch). On the structure's south side Dyggve's excavations revealed a rectangular chamber with a mosaic floor, like a kind of antechamber, with a marble stairway on the south side.

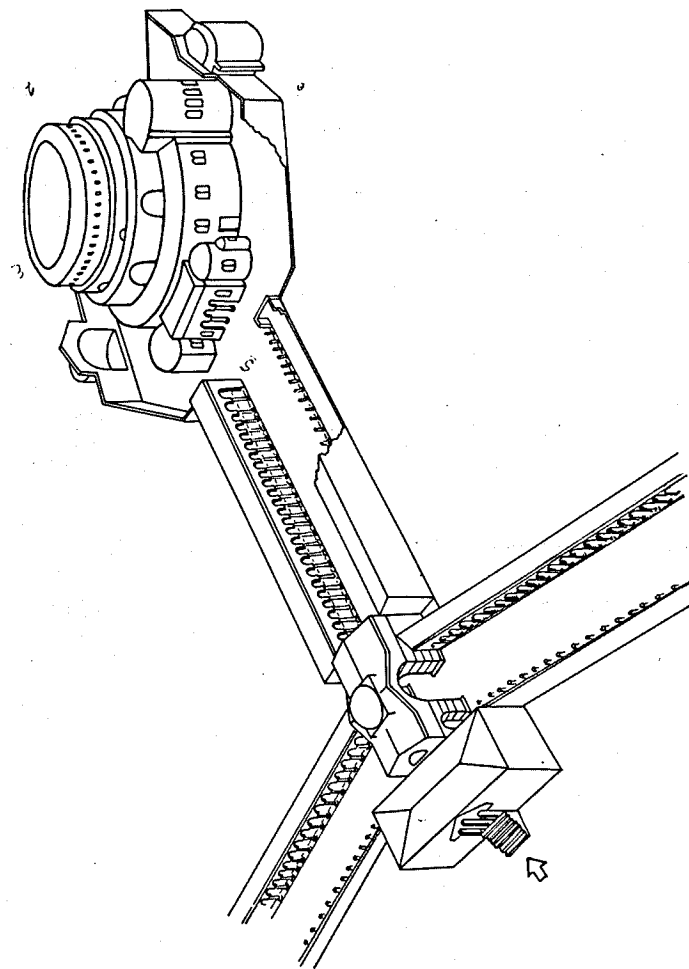
Underneath Galerius's arch two colonnaded avenues intersected: one was the present-day Egnatia Street —the Via Regia of the Romans, known to the Byzantines as Leophoros (the Avenue); and the other was a ceremonial way linking the arch and the Rotunda and leading to the south side of the latter's courtyard (fig. 3).

In Dyggve's view, the orientation of the hippodrome and the Palace, the antechamber with the stairway south of the Arch, and the ceremonial avenue linking the latter with the Rotunda, indicate the unity and planned relationship between all these





*Fig. 2. Plan of the Arch of Galerius.*



*Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the Arch of Galerius, the Rotunda, and the two colonnaded roads, during the Early Christian period.*

monuments. The Rotunda in particular, because of its position and magnificent aspect, seemed to form the centrepiece of Galerius's whole complex. However, the findings of the most recent excavations in Gounari Street have begun to shake Dyggve's theory, at least as regards the existence of a functional axis between the Palace and the Arch.

## HISTORY

The Rotunda was built by Galerius in the first decade of the fourth century AD, and one theory has it that he intended it to be his own mausoleum. What is certain, however, is that the building never actually served this purpose, for Galerius died and was buried far away from Thessaloniki. A more commonly-held belief is that the Rotunda was a place of worship, dedicated to the Cabiri or to Zeus, the patron of the joint rulers Diocletian and Galerius. Although the evidence does not permit us to determine the monument's purpose with any degree of certainty, it is nevertheless safe to conjecture that the official festivals of the Palace were celebrated in it. Moreover, the colonnaded avenue linking the Arch and the Rotunda must have been used by the emperor and his retinue when they went to attend various ceremonies.

The pagan temenos was subsequently converted into a Christian church, and probably functioned as a martyrium —that is, as a place where the relics of martyrs were venerated. This theory is supported both by the building's circular shape and by the representations of martyrs amongst the mosaics in the dome. Various dates have been put forward for

the Roman building's conversion into a Christian church, ranging from the end of the fourth century to the beginning of the sixth century, but most scholars date it to the time of Theodosius the Great, the end of the fourth century.

From the tenth to the twelfth century and from 1525 to 1591, as a Christian church, the Rotunda was also the cathedral church of Thessaloniki.

In the year 1591, as we are informed by the inscription on the lintel over the west entrance, on the initiative of seyh Hortaci Süleiman Efendi the Turks took over the monument and converted it into a mosque with a minaret which has survived to the present day.

After the liberation of Thessaloniki in 1912, the building was once again given over to Christian worship until 1920. Shortly before this, in 1918, the French architect Ernest Hébrard, a member of the Archaeological Mission of the Armée d'Orient, began archaeological investigations in the area of the Rotunda and the Arch of Galerius. Later on, in 1939, the Danish archaeologist and architect Dyggve continued where Hébrard had left off, extending his research to include the whole of the Galerian complex.

In 1952 and 1953 for the first time the Archaeological Service carried out cleaning and preservation

work on the mosaics in the dome, to which Dyggve had earlier drawn attention.

In 1974 the Thessaloniki Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities carried out limited excavations intended to clarify certain problems in the area of the south propylaeum of the Christian church.

The earthquakes which struck Thessaloniki in 1978 aggravated the static problems which had long been apparent in the building, and the mosaics too suffered considerable damage. In addition to this, parts of the top and balcony of the minaret collapsed.

Under the supervision of Professors Nicholas Moutsopolos and George Penelis, the leaders of the team formed by the Service for the Restoration of Damage in Northern Greece especially to deal with the Rotunda, timber supports were constructed on the monument's south side. At the same time, excavations were carried out both inside and outside the Rotunda as well as investigations centring on the building itself, the results of which have not yet been published. A working party from the Archaeological Service temporarily detached the mosaics from the soffits of the west, south, and east barrel vaults for preservation work. And finally local injections were carried out on the mosaics in the dome.

## NAME

Scholars do not fully agree about the original name given to the Rotunda as a Christian church. A. Ammann some time ago, and E. Kleinbauer more recently, both maintained that the church was originally dedicated to Christ under the name *Dynamis Theou* (Power of God). More widely accepted, however, is George Theocharidis's theory that the church was dedicated to the *Asomatoi* or Archangels—whence the whole neighbourhood was known as the «Asomatoi quarter» and the nearby gate in the city's east wall the «Asomatoi Gate».

The church received its present name of St George's in more recent times, from the small church opposite the west entrance to its courtyard. It was here that the consecrated vessels and icons were transferred when the Rotunda became a mosque in 1591. After this change the old name of the larger church was forgotten and the name of the small neighbouring church prevailed.

From 1591 onwards, under the Turks, the Rotunda was called Hortaç Efendi Cami'i and also Eski Metropoliye, or Old Cathedral, because, as we have noted, it had formerly served as the cathedral church of Thessaloniki.

Today the church is known as St George's or the Rotunda (and sometimes both together), the latter name being encountered for the first time in the writings of eighteenth - and nineteenth-century travellers.

## ARCHITECTURE

### *a. The Roman structure*

The Rotunda is a pericentral building—that is, constructed around a notional central axis and covered by a conical timber roof or a hemispherical dome. Such buildings are either circular or polygonal in shape, and were at one time used as mausoleums, as memorial structures over the tombs of martyrs (i.e. martyria), and also as baptisteries and churches.

— This architectural form is equally common in the East and the West and it would be very difficult to pinpoint a prototype. St George's Rotunda possibly has parallels in the Pantheon in Rome and Diocletian's mausoleum at Spalato, though the latter is a octagonal structure. —

Originally the Rotunda's plan was very simple: an enormous cylinder topped by a semicircular dome (fig. 4). The walls were constructed by the characteristic technique of the period, that is successive brick courses alternating with broad bands of mortared rubblework. Only in the dome and the barrel-vaulting of the bays were bricks used exclusively, a system of construction which originated in the East. Both the bricks and the rubblework were bound with strong hydraulic mortar.

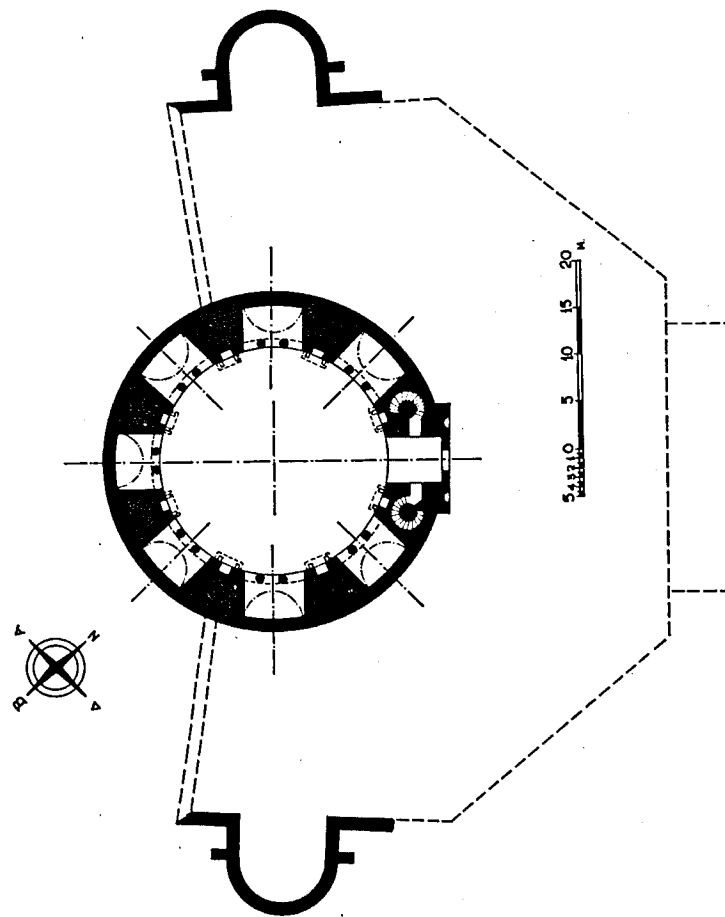


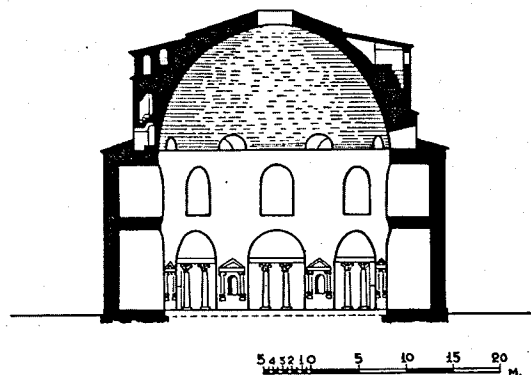
Fig. 4. Plan of the Rotunda during the Roman period.

The circular outer walls are of uniform thickness (6.3 m.) as far up as the base of the dome, at which point they become thinner, since their purpose is simply to protect the dome and support the tiled roof, which obviously exerts much less pressure than the weight of the dome itself. This difference in the thickness of the walls meant that the roof had to be built on three levels: the first section is level with the base of the dome, the second a little higher, and the third is the roof proper, being conical and constructed in three stages (fig. 5, pl. 2).

The entrance to the building in Roman times was through the south barrel vault, which was on the same axis as the ceremonial avenue. To the right and left of the entrance two spiral staircases were constructed in the wall itself, leading to the roof, but the east staircase is now bricked up.

The circular interior chamber of the Rotunda is 24.5 m. in diameter, and its height from the floor to the keystone of the dome is 29.8 m. The base of the wall has been opened up to form eight large square barrel-vaulted bays. According to George Velenis, it seems likely that at one time tribela —triple arcades— were formed at the front of each bay by two columns supporting a curved architrave. Higher up above the bays is a row of eight arched windows, and

around the base of the dome there are eight small lunettes piercing the thick masonry and assisting the illumination of the interior (fig. 5).



*Fig. 5. Longitudinal section of the Rotunda during the Roman period.*

There was at one time a circular opening (opaoion) at the apex of the dome —likewise to provide illumination, but also for ventilation— as is indicated by the deep drainage well in the centre of the circular chamber. Such apertures are a common feature of this type of monument.

From an aesthetic point of view, the monument, externally at least, seems very ponderous. Inside, however, there has been a clear attempt to neutralise this impression: the large bays at the base of the

circular wall, the arched windows in the second row, and the lunettes higher up are all designed to alleviate the weight of the building and to create the impression that it is supported not by a thick wall but by the solid piers formed between the bays. The small rectangular recesses which were originally constructed at the base of each pier also helped to lighten the whole structure. Each of these recesses was framed by two small columns standing on two marble corbels and supporting an arched or triangular pediment. The recesses thus resembled small temples, within which stood small devotional statues. Only two of these recesses remain today, one of them with its corbels intact in their original position (pl. 4).

This, then, was the general shape of the Rotunda in the Roman period. Dyggve proved that the building had been constructed in a *temenos* — a sacred precinct — which was protected by a semi-octagonal wall with two recesses or *exedrae*, one at the east and one at the west (fig. 4).

*b. The Early Christian church*

When the Christians took over the building they needed to bring about certain modifications and additions, so that it would correspond to the

devotional requirements of the new religion (figs. 6 and 7).

The most significant and permanent change was the addition of the sanctuary to the east bay — a rectangular section ending in a semi-circular apse. Around the outer wall of the church, at a distance of eight metres, a circular wall was built. At the same time the columns and the curved architraves at the front of the bays were removed and the bays were opened up behind. And so the original church now acquired an ambulatory, a circular ground-level stoa, which almost doubled its area, the better to cater for the great numbers of Christians. The roof of the ambulatory almost reached the bottom of the large arched windows.

The large west bay opposite the sanctuary was converted into a new entrance and a narthex was constructed in front of it. The south entrance did not fall out of use, however; it was in fact given greater emphasis by the addition of a porch in the form of a portico flanked by a round chapel on the east and a octagonal structure on the west side. Thus, the connection between the Rotunda and the triumphal Arch was maintained, a fact which might mean that the Rotunda had become the official church of the Christian emperor too.

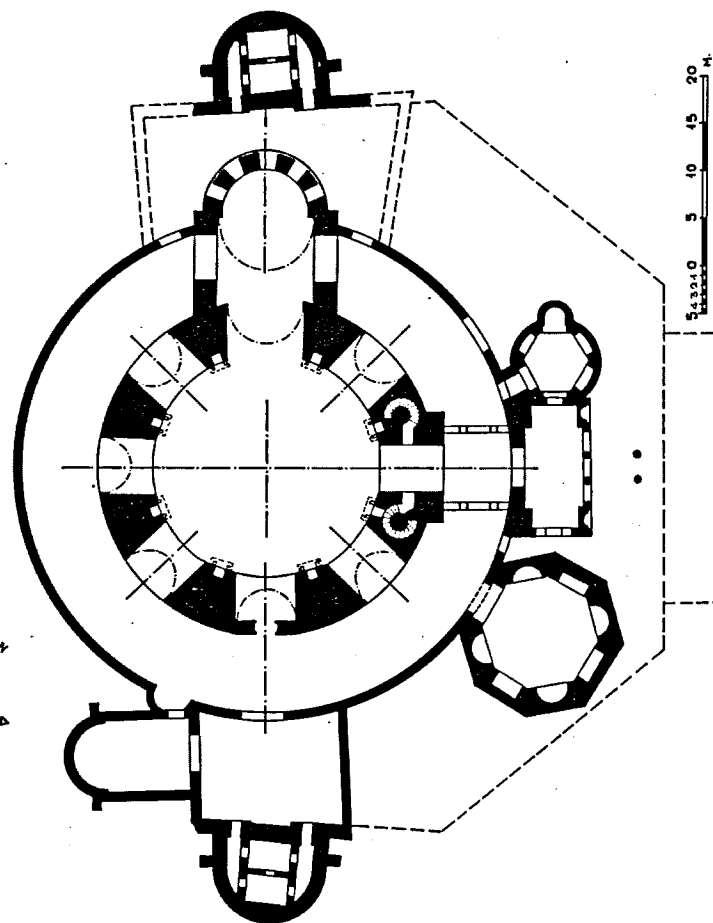


Fig. 6. Plan of the Rotunda during the Early Christian period.

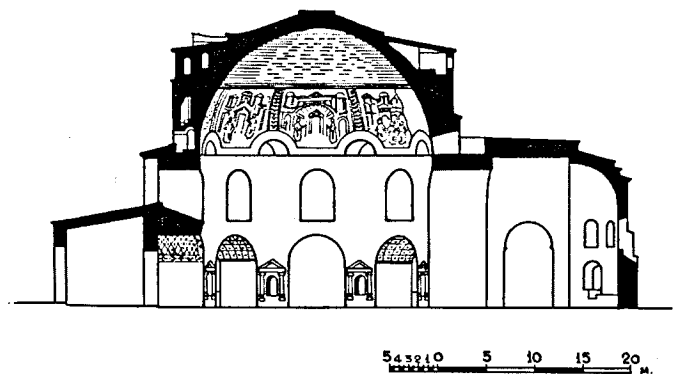


Fig. 7. Longitudinal section of the Rotunda during the Early Christian period.

When the Rotunda was converted into a Christian church, the opaiion in the top of the dome was closed up. This is clear from the bricks which were used to seal it, for they are the same as the ones used in the construction of the sanctuary and the circular outer wall.

Excavations have revealed that the exedrae at the east and west of the enclosure were replaced by crypts - underground constructions built to contain holy relics. Each of these communicated with the church, to facilitate the passage of the liturgical procession, which was an essential feature of the worship of the holy relics.



The crypts which replaced the old exedrae of the temenos and the rectangular apsidal sanctuary at the east end of the Rotunda created a distinct west-east axis, which, far from cancelling out the old imperial north-south axis, in fact intersected it.

*c. The present form of the monument*

Of the changes which were made in the Rotunda in the Early Christian period, the only one which is evident today is the sanctuary. At some point which cannot be determined with any accuracy, but which was probably in the eleventh century, part of the dome and part of the triumphal arch collapsed—possibly as the result of an earthquake—and were reconstructed. At the same time the opportunity was taken to add the two transverse buttresses to protect the sanctuary from any future collapse (figs. 8 and 9).

The circular wall of the ambulatory, the narthex, and the porch at the south entrance were probably destroyed by an earthquake sometime before the ninth century. However, they cannot have been in existence in 1591, when the church was converted into a mosque, because the minaret is built on the site of the ambulatory.

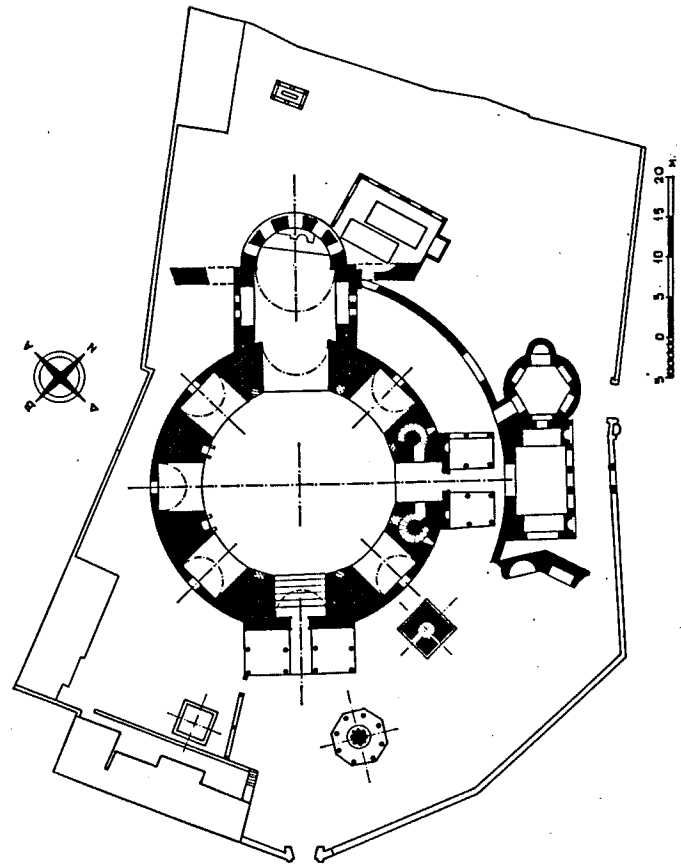


Fig. 8. Plan of the Rotunda in its present form.

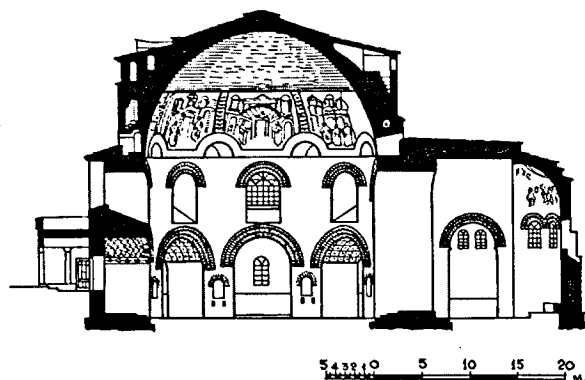


Fig. 9. Longitudinal section of the Rotunda in its present form.

The period of Turkish domination imposed no fundamental changes on the monument, but of course it left its traces. Outside, one can see the minaret — the only surviving one in Thessaloniki and the work of Sinan Pasha — the fountain south-west of the west entrance, and the two porticoes constructed in front of the south and west entrances. We should also mention the small enclosure outside the south corner of the sanctuary apse, which surrounds two marble tombs. One belongs to Seyh Hortaci Efendi and the other, probably, to an otherwise unknown Yusuf Bey. The latter constructed the tomb

of the former, as is attested by the inscription on the lintel over the entrance to the enclosure.

Inside the building the base of the mihrab\* is still to be seen in the sanctuary apse, as well as traces all round the walls from when the Turks raised the height of the floor.

\* A conch in a mosque orientated towards Mecca, in which the imam stands and directs the prayers.

## THE DECORATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Apart from the alterations they made to the building itself, the Christians also supplemented the polychrome marble revetment of the interior walls and decorated the dome, the barrel-vaults of the bays, and the lunettes at the base of the dome with exceptional mosaics.

The generally accepted dating for the decoration of the interior and also for the building's transformation into a Christian church is the end of the fourth century —though recent researchers prefer a later date in the fifth or sixth century.

The fresco of the Ascension, which is depicted on the semi-dome of the sanctuary apse, was painted later, during the Middle Byzantine period.

### *a. The marble revetment*

Today the interior surface of the walls is quite bare, but the numerous holes and nails discernible in the walls together with various excavated finds leave us in no doubt that the walls were revetted from the floor to the base of the dome with polychrome marble slabs. On the basis of the holes and nails in

the walls, E. Dyggve was able to reconstruct the design of this marble revetment down to the smallest detail.

The walls were divided by false pilasters and horizontal bands into large rectangular sections, while the various arched openings were framed by curved bands. Discs in opus sectile technique and in a variety of designs were placed in the large spaces between the horizontal and vertical marble fillets.

### *b. The mosaics*

The mosaic decoration of St. George's has not been preserved in its entirety. However, the cleaning and securing carried out in 1953 allow the visitor to enjoy the richness and beauty of the colours of those mosaics which remain. One may better appreciate their importance if one bears in mind that they are the oldest wall mosaics in the East, the products of a great artistic workshop in Thessaloniki.

The existing mosaics comprise two large thematic groups: the first group consists of those which decorate the lunettes of the dome and the soffits of the barrel vaults at ground level, while the second comprises the large compositions in the lowest zone and at the top of the dome.

The mosaics of the first group are purely decorative. Their subjects are either geometric or taken from the animal and plant world: intersecting circles, ceiling panels, imbrications, birds, baskets of fruit, and vases of flowers cover the entire surface of the soffits (pl. 5-7 and I and III). Only the decoration of the south barrel vault is conspicuously different: upon a silver mosaic ground shines a large Latin cross surrounded by stars, birds with ribbons about their necks, flowers, and fruits, all arranged relatively symmetrically (pl. 8 and 9, and II).

The similarity between the decoration of the lunettes and that of the soffits of the large barrel vaults is thematic only; the colours are completely different. In the barrel vaults bright colours predominate - crimson, green, and blue, on a gold or silver ground. Conversely, in the lunettes in the dome pastel shades have been used - light green, green-yellow, lemon, and rose, on a ground of white marble tesserae.

These colour contrasts are not fortuitous, but due to the variation of the light. The lunettes were not decorated with bright colours, because they are in direct contact with the light, unlike the barrel vaults below, which receive indirect light. In both cases, however, the variety of colours and the

successful combination of small and large tesserae create the impression rather of paintings than of mosaics.

The subjects and the naturalistic rendition of the mosaics in this group have their origins in the great artistic tradition of the Hellenistic period. The same themes are common in mosaic floors and woven fabrics of that period too. But by the appropriate selection of birds and fruits and by placing the large cross in the south barrel vault, the master artist of St George's contrived to incorporate a certain religious symbolism in these decorations.

The second group of mosaics comprises, as we have said, those in the dome, which are divided into three zones. Of these the lowest is the widest and the best preserved and was the only visible part of the dome mosaics before the cleaning operations of 1952-53. The base of this wide zone, which is known as the martyrs' frieze, is a mosaic band of projecting consoles linked by tiny arches. The tesserae are very brightly coloured: wine red, gold, blue, green, and yellow. This band, with its bright colours and its strong three-dimensional effect looks more like sculptured architecture, and in a way it forms the transition from the marble revetment of the walls to the mosaic decoration of the dome. The zone itself is

divided into eight equal panels by vertical bands, like pilasters, which are decorated with stylised acanthus leaves and support a richly decorated cornice (pl. 10-16 and IV). The cornice is composed of a row of bead and reel decorations, a row of projecting consoles, ovolo moulding and finally a band of confronted S-shaped motifs, the whole executed in tesserae of gold, silver, ultramarine and sea-blue, wine red, deep blue, and black.

The architectural façades forming the background to each panel are of two-storey structures standing on low podia. Four architectural types of buildings are depicted, with minor variations, in pairs, so that the north-east panel (pl. 16) corresponds with the south east (pl. 10), the north panel (pl. 15) with the south (pl. 11), and the north-west panel (pl. 14) with the south-west (pl. 12). The east panel is destroyed, but it must have match the west panel. In its place there is now an imitation in oil, which was painted by the Italian S. Rossi in 1889. In the centre of these architectural compositions, which are splendid in their gold and silver and all the colours of the spectrum, there is always an apse, an exedra, or an opening, and this central feature is flanked by castellated structures with unfluted and spiral columns or piers supporting arches, triangular

pediments, cupolas, and shallow barrel vaults. All these are adorned with pearls and all kinds of precious stones and architectural decorations. The rich curtains draped between the columns, the lampions suspended from the domes, the vases and the crosses on the roofs, the peacocks and other brightly-coloured birds, all augment the magnificence of the whole scene.

In the north and south panels (pl. 15 and 11), directly below the central apse, there is a ciborium with a hexagonal canopy and a large cross upon which the Holy Spirit is descending. In the centre of the north-west and south-west panels (pl. 14 and 12) a ciborium with a round canopy covers a table, upon which is a closed, richly decorated book, clearly a Gospel. In the west panel the place of the ciborium is taken by a low chancel screen, resembling an early Christian iconostasis (pl. 13).

The prevailing view is that the focal point of these architectural constructions represents the sanctuary of a Christian church, an interpretation which is supported both by the altars with the crosses and the Gospels, and by the luxurious curtains and lattice-work screens. The late Maria Sotiriou, venturing further, maintained that the structures portray not only the sanctuary but the entire church — the

church of Heaven, moreover, of which the earthly church is a replica.

As far as their form is concerned, the buildings resemble façades rendered in perspective, in which symmetry and magnificence are the dominant features.

Such two-storey structures were a very common feature of the Roman period, though their roots lie deep in the Hellenistic world. The fronts of the tombs carved in the rocks at Khaszne and El Deir in Arabia Petraea present many similarities with the architectural compositions of St George's. The same architectural form is also to be encountered in public buildings, such as the Library at Ephesus and the Agora at Miletus, and in the frescoes of Pompeii and Rome. The *scenae frontis*, or stage scenery, of the Hellenistic and Roman theatres also took a similar form.

These examples, and also actual churches in Syria and Palestine, must have been the models which inspired the master artist of St George's.

In front of each building stand the figures of two or three martyrs, without haloes, arms outspread in a frontal attitude of prayer. Today fifteen saints are discernible and small segments of a further pair. They are all saints whose origins lie in the East,

though their cults spread all over the Empire. Beside each one is written his name, his profession, and the date of his festival (cf. pl. 17). In this way a monumental illustrated calendar has been created, possibly the first ever in Christian art. The figures were selected from the various categories of martyrs in order to represent all those whose memory is honoured throughout the twelve months of the year and who comprise the church of Heaven.

Some of the saints depicted here were clerics in their lifetime-Romanos, for example, in the west panel (only his inscription now remains) (pl. 13), the unknown saint in the north-west panel (pl. 14 and 25), and Philip and Cyril in the north-east panel (pl. 16 and 29). The majority, however, were military men, such as Leo in the south-east panel (pl. 10 and 18), Onesiphoros in the south panel (pl. 11 and 20), the unknown saint and Eucarpion in the west panel (pl. 13 and 24), Basiliscos and Priscos in the north panel (pl. 15, 27, 28), and Therinos in the north-east panel (pl. 16 and 30). There are also two doctors—Cosmas and Damian in the south-west panel (pl. 12, 22, 23); a fluteplayer—Philemon—in the south-east panel (pl. 10 and 19); and finally a servant—Porphyrrios in the south panel (pl. 11 and 21).

The clerics and the non-military saints wear full-

length tunics and phelonia\*, while the military men are dressed in long tunics belted at the waist with a chlamys clasped at the right shoulder. On their chests these latter wear the *tablion*, a rhomboid piece of material indicating their rank. The unknown saint in the north-west panel and the doctor Cosmas in the south-west panel are wearing light grey phelonia with a hint of violet, while Damian's phelonion (in the south-west panel) is shadowed with greenish-yellow tones. All the other clerics and non-military saints wear purple-violet phelonia with folds and shadows in various shades of the same colour. Of the military saints, Leo (south-east panel) and Eucarpion (west panel) are dressed in chlamydes of the same deep violet colour, while the others wear white chlamydes with silver, grey, violet, and yellow tones.

The artist was not at all concerned with rendering the physical body, which is lost beneath the many drapes and folds of the garments. All his efforts were concentrated on portraying the spiritual expression and the particular physiognomy of each individual. We are thus presented with a series of superb portraits, with short hair —sometimes

\* Phelonion: a liturgical vestment of the Orthodox Church corresponding to the Latin paenula.

straight and sometimes curly — delicate features, and large eyes gazing ecstatically out upon the world (pl. 18-30). All the ages of man are represented in these portraits —young, middle-aged, and old (cf. pl. IV, V, and VII). There is a classical beauty and harmony in the faces of some of the martyrs, such as Onesiphoros and Porphyrios in the south panel (pl. 20 and 21); in others one may observe a modesty and gentleness such as is fitting in saints —Cosmas in the south-west panel (pl. 22), the unknown saint in the north-west panel (pl. 25), and Bishop Philip in the north-east panel (pl. 29). Finally, there are some faces which project an innocence and childlike goodness, such as those of Leo in the south-east panel (pl. 18) and Priscos in the north panel (pl. 28).

One feature which deserves particular mention is the great variety of colours in the tesserae used in the facial details, and particularly in the hair and beards. Unnatural though these colours might seem —red, yellow, orange, and violet for the hair, deep blue for the beards— they are nevertheless so cleverly combined that not only do they not jar the eye, but on the contrary they give the onlooker a rare aesthetic pleasure.

Their individual characteristics apart, the saints' figures also share the common features of small

heads in relation to the bodies, and delicately modelled faces without dark, sharply-defined contours.

The middle zone of the dome is almost completely destroyed, the only surviving section being the bottom, depicting short grass or bushy plants, amongst which are discernible twenty-two or twenty-four pairs of feet, and in places a considerable part of the figures' clothing. The figures themselves, grouped in threes, appear to have been in vigorous motion, in contrast to the deep tranquillity prevailing in the martyrs' frieze. According to Maria Sotiriou, this zone depicts a host of white-clad angels in various attitudes of adoration, probably with their heads turned upwards gazing at Christ.

Christ is portrayed in the apex of the dome within a shining glory composed of the colours of the rainbow, a wreath of the fruits and flowers of all the seasons, and a circle of many-rayed stars of which only fourteen now survive (pl. 31-33 and VIII). The glory is supported by four angels on the wing positioned on the church's diagonal axes. There survive the mosaic heads, hands, and powerful outspread wings of three of the angels; heavenly peace and beauty are imprinted upon their faces (pl. 34 and 35). Of the cyclical movement of their bodies

there remain only the fleeting lines of the preliminary charcoal outlines on the bricks of the dome.

Between the two angels near the sanctuary the mythical phoenix is depicted. Its body is painted upon a red disc, from the centre of which stream bright rays of light.

In the centre of the glory, on a silver ground, Christ stood originally, his right foot slightly forward and his right hand raised in a triumphant gesture; in the other hand he held a staff with a cross on the top, the symbol of his victory. He wore a long swirling tunic. Unlike the heads of the martyrs, that of Christ was surrounded by a golden halo. The beardless face was framed by long hair tumbling down upon his shoulders. This is the model known as the «young Christ», which is encountered elsewhere in similar representations. Here he was presented as the triumphant conqueror over death and life, as was indicated by his attitude and the staff surmounted by a cross in his hand. The eschatological significance of this representation is further emphasised by the presence of the phoenix, the symbol of eternity and immortality.

Of the figure of Christ, only the fingers of the right hand, a small section of the halo, and the top of his staff now remain. The rest can be surmised from



the charcoal outlines discernible on the masonry. These outlines guided the artist and are most instructive in that they indicate that the mosaics were composed on the ground bit by bit and were then affixed in their corresponding position on the wall. This is also evident from the nails with T-and L-shaped heads which have survived in the dome and were designed to retain the plaster.

In bringing to a close this examination of the mosaics in the dome, we must observe that they are all linked to form a homogeneous and inseparable whole. Christ at the apex is the conceptual centre around which all the decoration is arranged. The radiant glory and the two iconographical zones below symbolise the beatitude of the heavenly church, with the angels and all the saints praising and glorifying the resurrected Christ.

*c. The fresco of the Ascension*

In addition to the mosaics, St George's also has a fresco on the semidome of the sanctuary apse. It is not in very good condition, however, for it too was plastered over by the Turks (pl. 36). This is evident from the plentiful hammer-marks all over its surface.

The fresco represents the Ascension of Christ in two zones, one above the other. Above, Christ is seated on a rainbow within a bright elliptical disc supported by two angels: in the lower zone, directly below Christ, the Virgin Mary stands in an attitude of prayer, flanked by two angels and by the apostles, headed by Peter and Paul.

Above the angel and the first two apostles the following gospel verse still remains:

Οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναληφθεὶς  
ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐ(ρα)νὸν  
οὗτος ἐλεύσεται ὃν τρὶς  
πονεῖ θέσασθαι πορευόμενον εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν.

The edge of the fresco is surrounded by a climbing convoluted plant.

This representation is a particularly notable work of art, with regard to both its style and its position. The figures are characterised by large, animated eyes, sharply outlined facial features, clumsily executed folds in the garments, and an unusual variety and freedom in their positions and movements.

The artist probably had in mind an older work, which, however, he did not copy slavishly, but rather

rendered it in accordance with the spirit of his time, the ninth century. Some scholars have seen a close stylistic relationship between the St George's Ascension and that of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki, and have gone on to express the opinion that the two works are contemporary and indeed may even have been executed by the same artist.

The Ascension fresco's position in the sanctuary apse accords with the iconography of the period; for in the ninth century and a little earlier —during the iconoclast controversy— the Ascension was not depicted in the central dome, but either in the semi-dome of the apse or on the vertical walls of the sanctuary. The Ascension was later to be transferred to the vault over the bema.

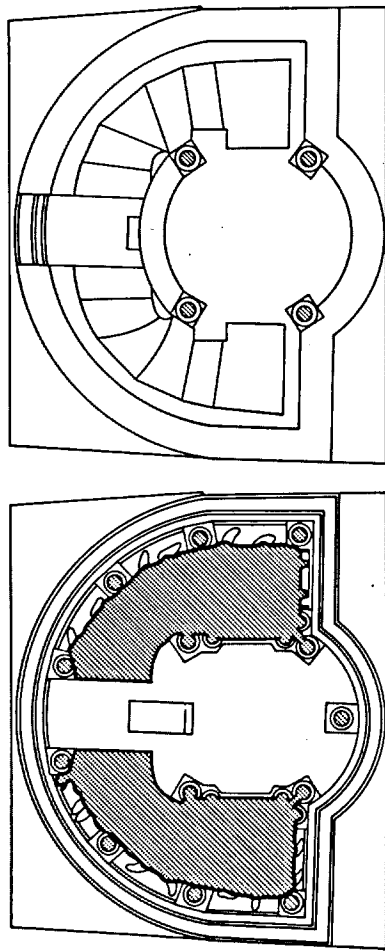
## THE AMBO

On the site of the church's south porch one can now see the marble base of its ambo (pl. 37). Two large sections of the ambo itself are on exhibition in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, taken there by the Turks in 1900. Previously, the one section was in St George's and the other in St Panteleimon's in Thessaloniki. The ambo is generally considered to be a masterpiece in terms of both its composition and its delicate sculpture-work. It belongs to the category of ambos in the shape of an open fan. The body was formed by two weighty sculptured pieces of marble, supported by a separate base, and its form was a semicircle flanked by straight wings on the right and left. The entrance was at the back by means of two sets of steps (fig. 10).

Around the lower part of the ambo's exterior there are scalloped niches, separated from each other by Corinthian columns. The spandrels between the niches are occupied by eagles with spread wings and vines (fig. 11; pl. 38 and 39).

The façade above the niches forms a convex intricate frieze crowned with a band of saw-edged acanthus leaves.

The centre of the ambo was originally covered



Fi. 10. Horizontal section and plan of the base of the ambo, according to Orlandos.

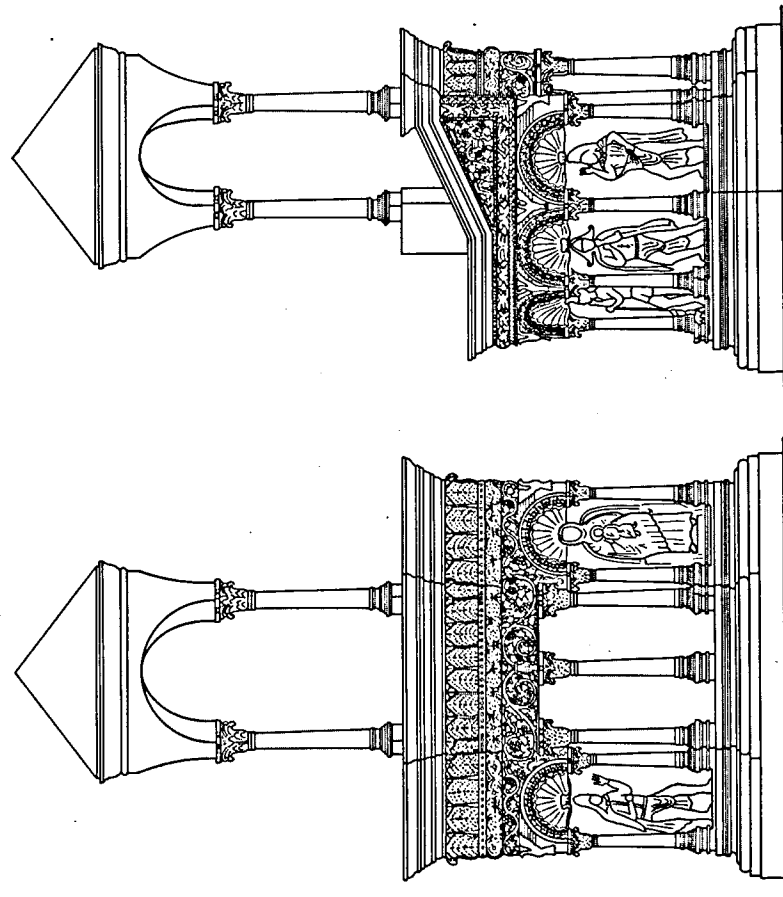


Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the ambo, according to Orlandos.

by a circular ciborium or canopy, supported by four slender columns.

Each of the niches in the exterior face contained a figure in high relief. The whole scene represented the Adoration of the Magi, who were portrayed on the one side searching for Christ and on the other bringing him their gifts. An angel was leading the Magi towards the Virgin Mary, who was seated on a throne holding the Christ child upon her lap (pl. 38 and 39).

The Magi are rendered as ordinary people, in accordance with the conception of Helleno-Roman tradition. The Virgin and Child, in contrast, with their frontal attitude and their hieratical solemnity, seem to be of another world. In the words of Diehl, «Both have a rather stiff majesty, a rather solemn gravity, which fits in well with the ideas of the new society and already foreshadows the style and iconography of the Ravenna mosaics of the sixth century».

As far as the dating of the ambo is concerned, opinions differ widely. In all probability, however, it dates from the second half of the fifth century.

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18. Leo (detail of pl. 10)
19. Philemon (detail of pl. 10)
20. Onesiphoros (detail of pl. 11)
21. Porphyrios (detail of pl. 11)
22. Cosmas (detail of pl. 12)
23. Damian (detail of pl. 12)
24. Unknown martyr (detail of pl. 13)
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27. Basiliscos (detail of pl. 15)
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38. Upper left and right sections of the façade of the ambo. One of the Magi and the Virgin and Child (Archaeological Museum of Istanbul)
39. Side view of the upper right-hand section of the ambo. The Virgin and Child and the angel leading the Magi (Archaeological Museum of Istanbul)

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- I. Soffit of the south-east bay (detail)
- II. Soffit of the south bay (detail)
- III. Soffit of the west bay (detail)
- IV. South-west panel of the martyrs' frieze
- V. Priscos (detail of the north panel of the martyrs' frieze)
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- VII. Cosmas (detail of the south-west panel of the martyrs' frieze)
- VIII. Christ's «glory» and the angels in the apex of the dome.



## FIGURES AND PHOTOGRAPHS

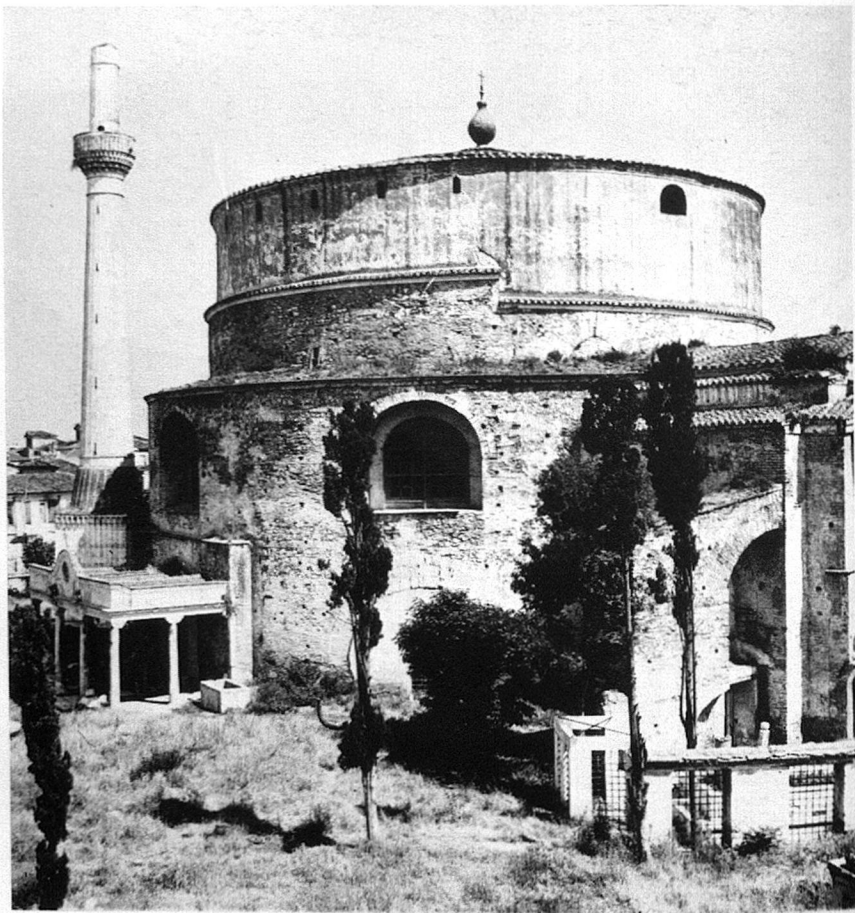
Figures 1 and 2 were printed from stereotypes 1 and 2 of *Ch. Makaronas's* guide «'Η καμάρα», τὸ θριαμβευτικὸ τόξο τοῦ Γαλερίου στὴ Θεσσαλονίκη, Thessaloniki 1969. Figures 3-9 are by the architect Constantine Trochidis, and based on the corresponding plans by E. Hébrard, E. Dyggve, G. Velenis and N. Moutsopoulos, the results of the Archaeological Service's excavations in 1974, and my own on-the-spot observations. Mr Trochidis also copied figures 10 and 11 from *A. Orlandos's* well-known work 'Η ξυλόστεγος παλαιοχριστιανικὴ βασιλικὴ τῆς μεσογειακῆς λεκάνης, Athens 1954, figs. 518 and 519.

The photographs for plates 3, 4, 36, and 37 were taken by G. Nikoleris, who also reprinted photographs 38 and 39 from *W. F. Volbach's* and *M. Hirmer's* book, *Frühchristliche Kunst*, München 1958, plates 78 and 79. The rest of the black-and-white photographs were taken in the early 1950's by G. Lykidis. G. Kanistras took the colour photographs.

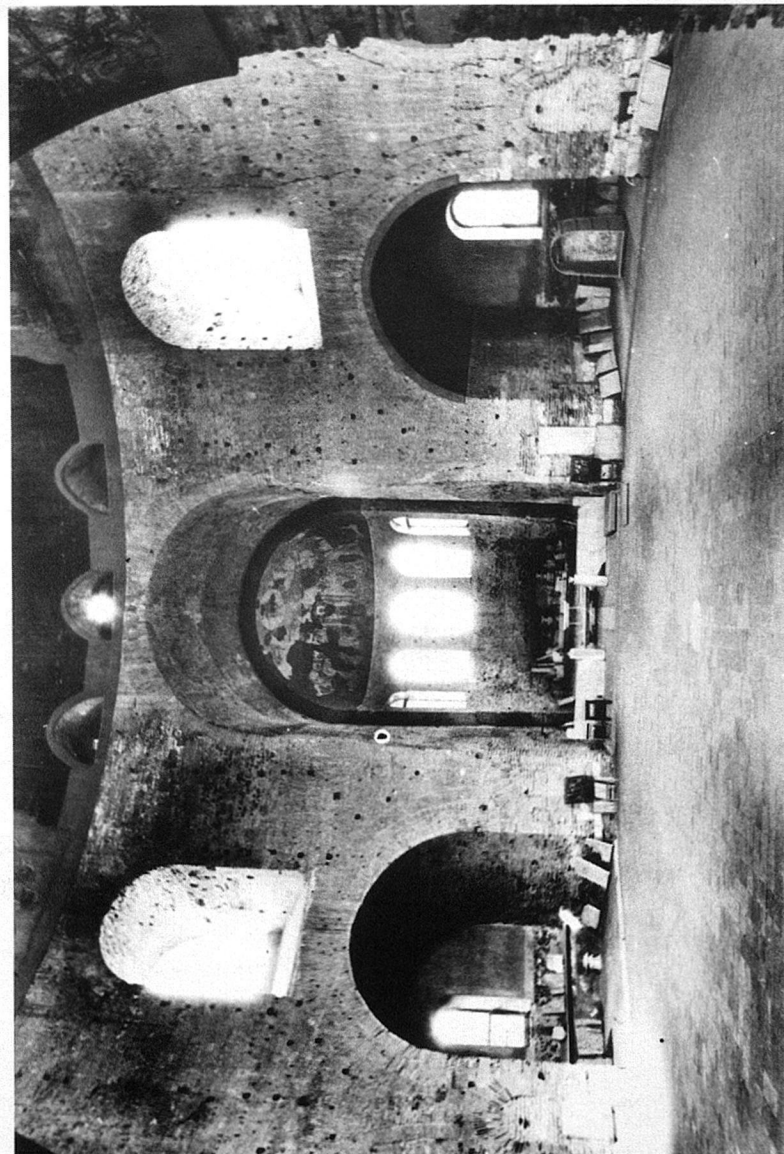
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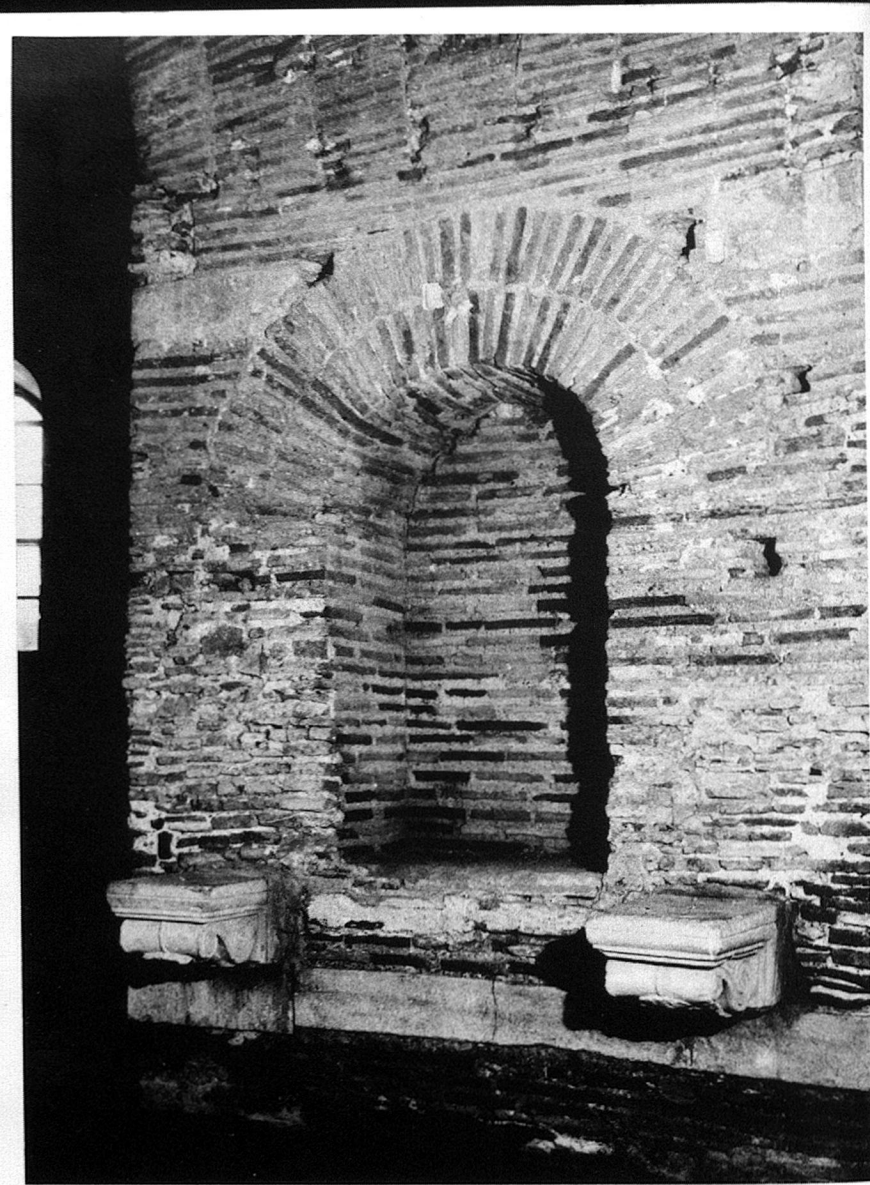
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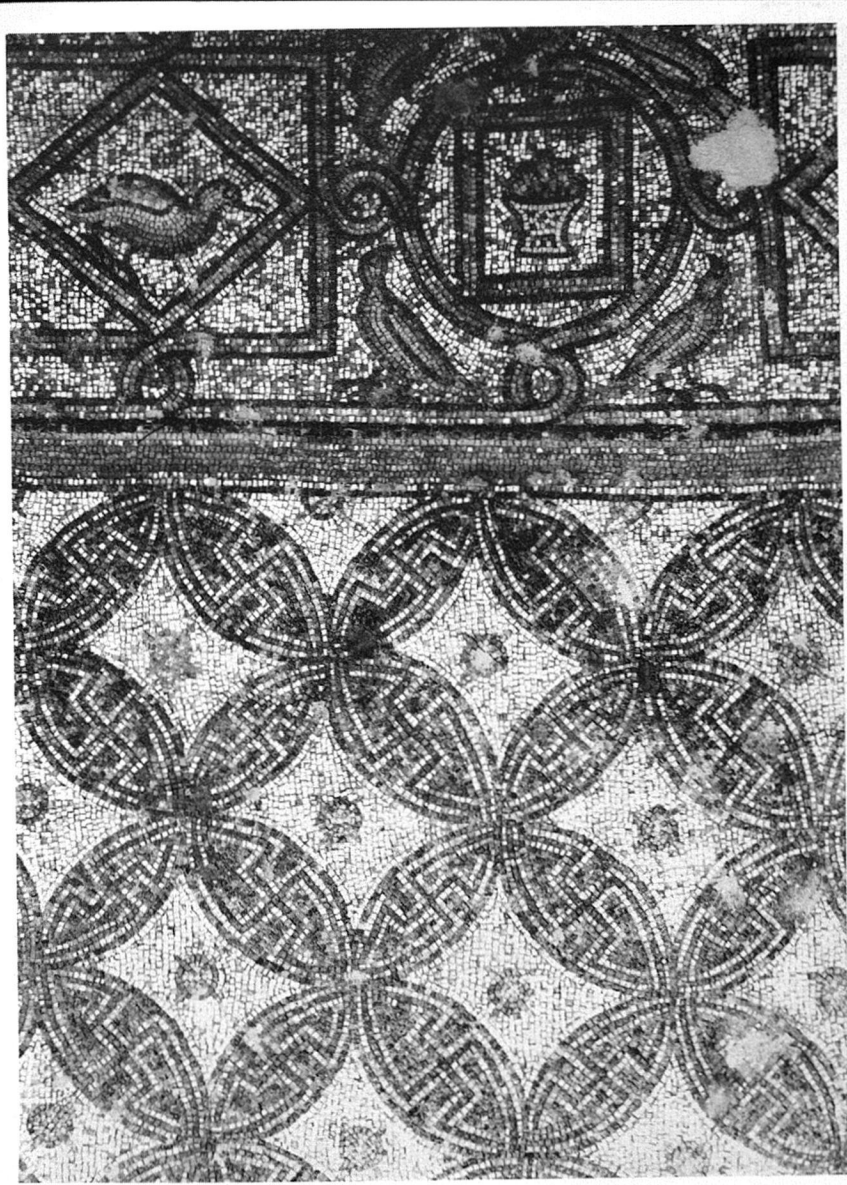
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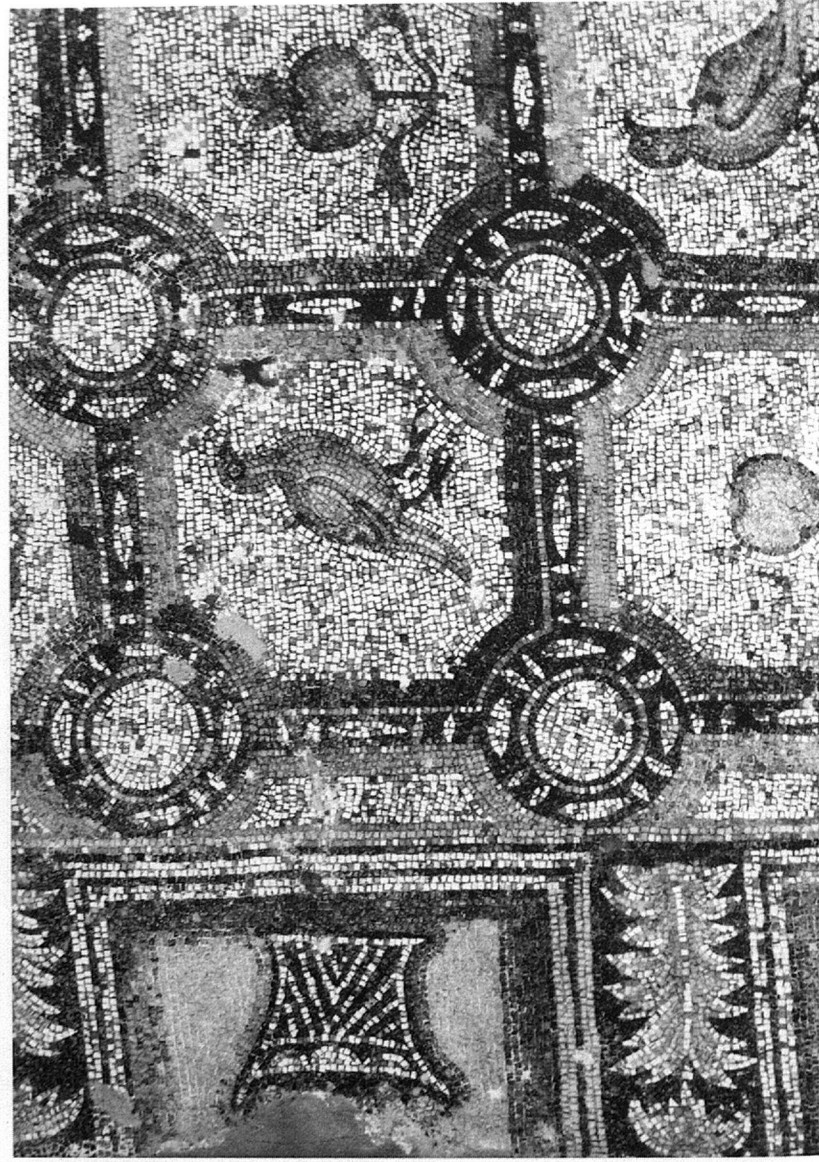


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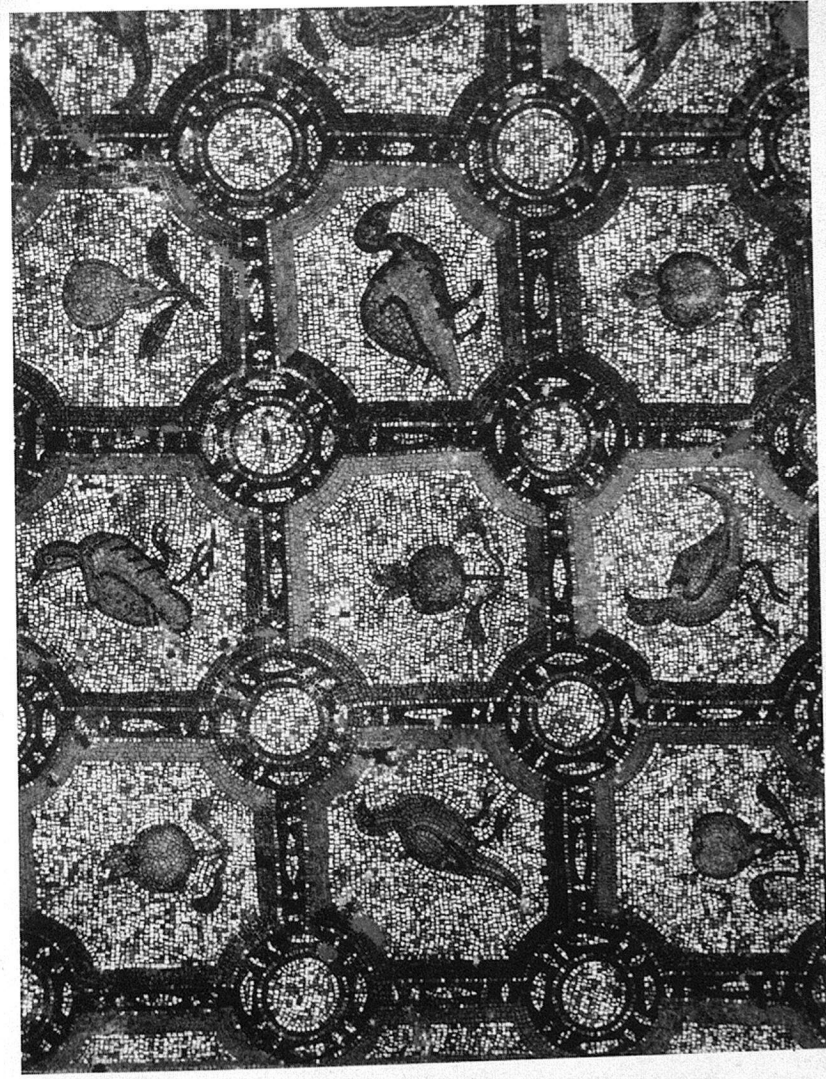


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Pl. 6



Pl. 7

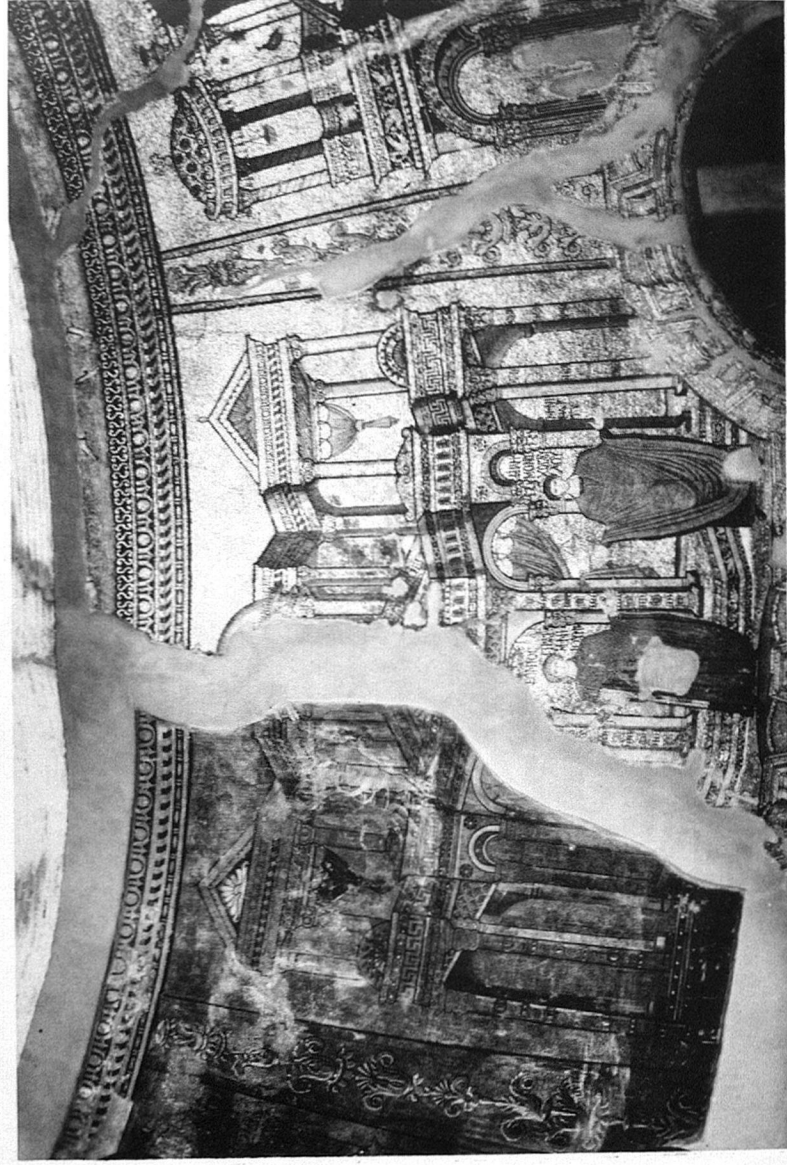


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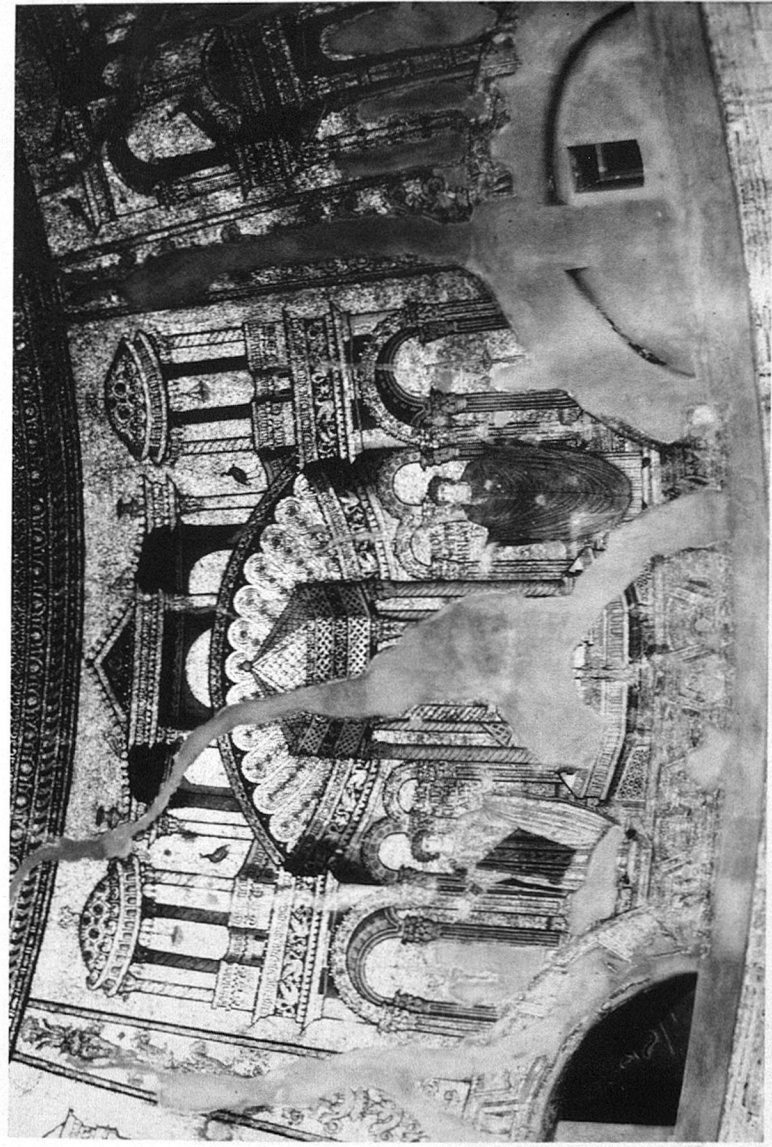


Pl. 9





Pl. 10



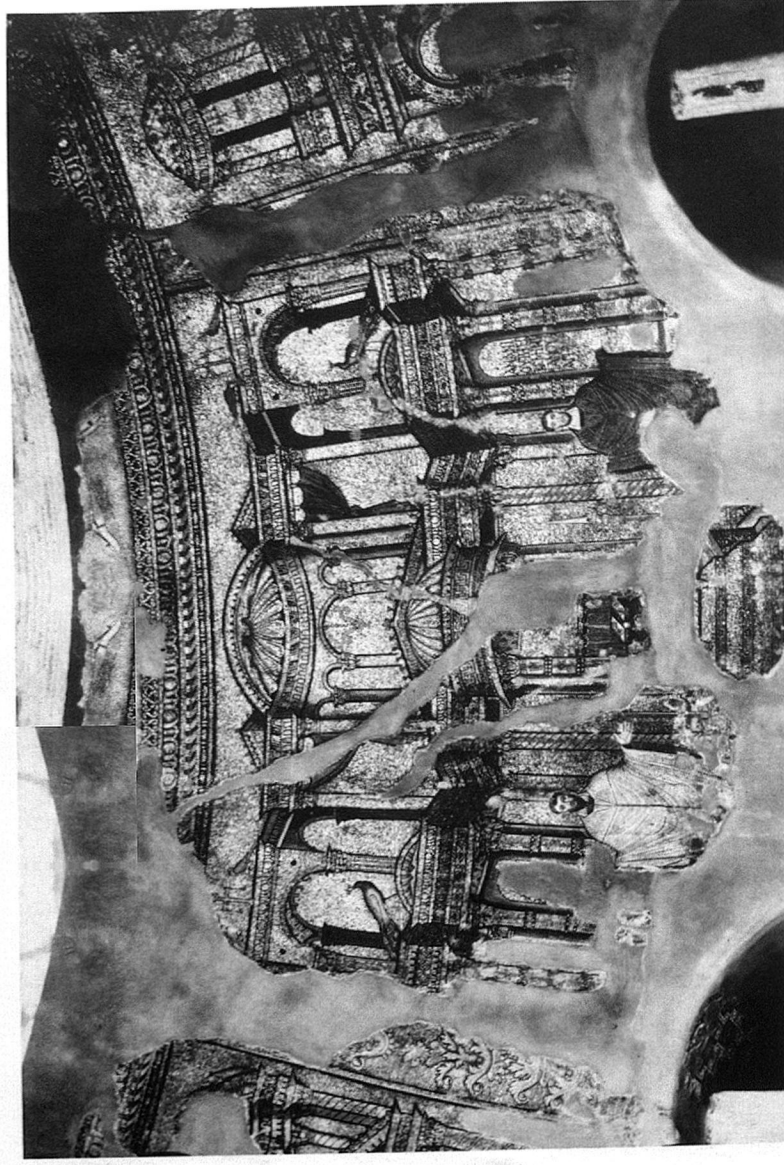
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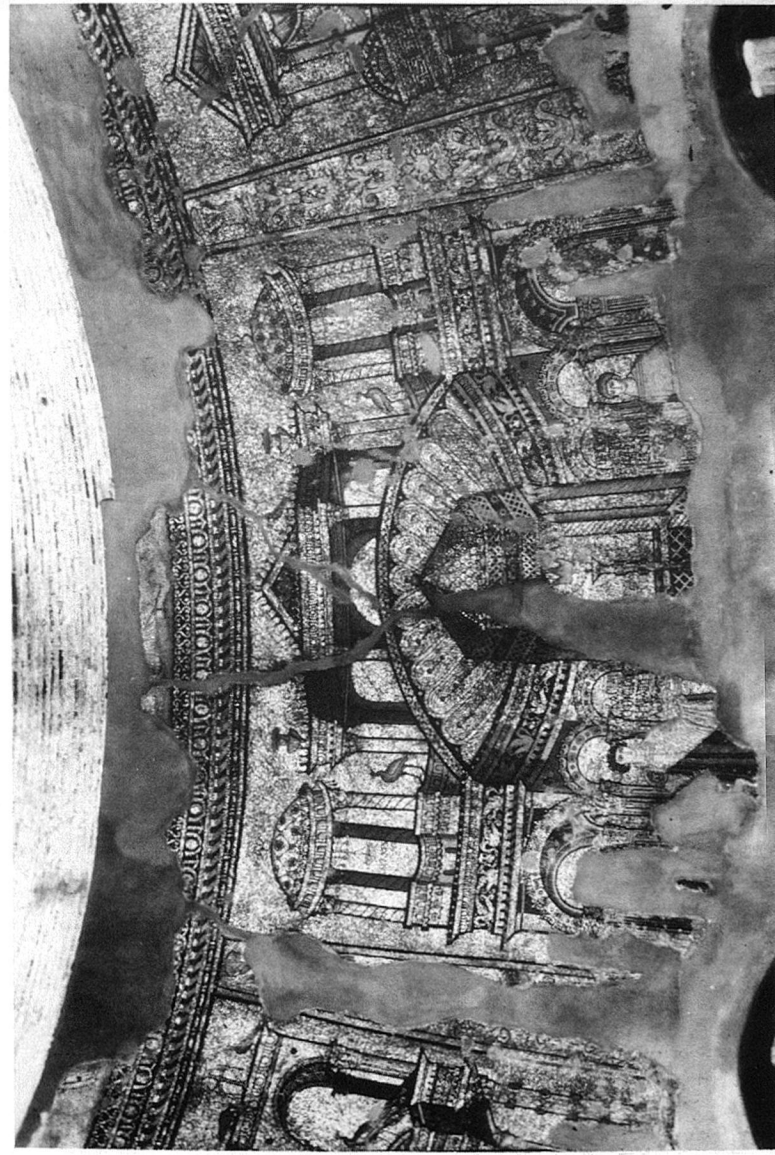
Pl. 12







Pl. 14

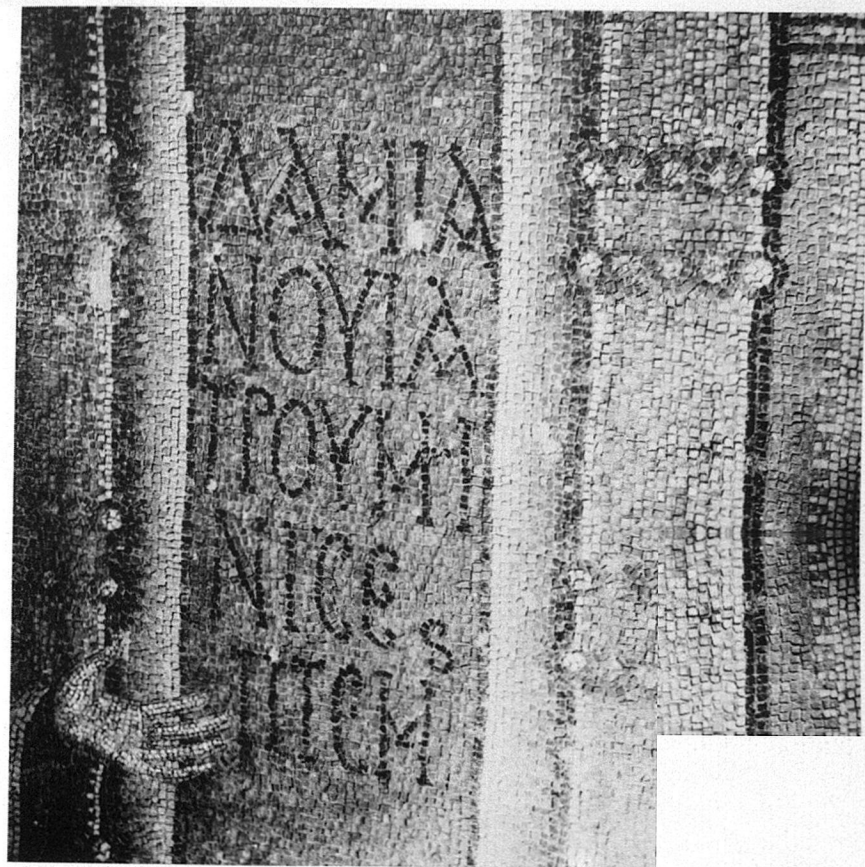


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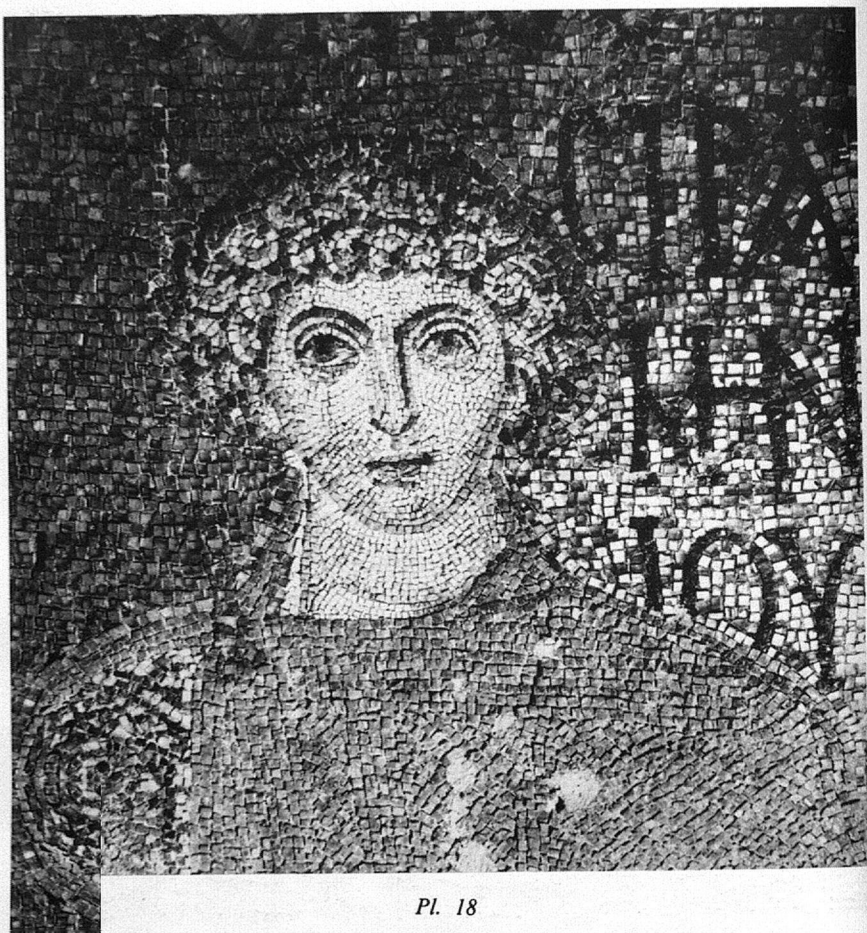




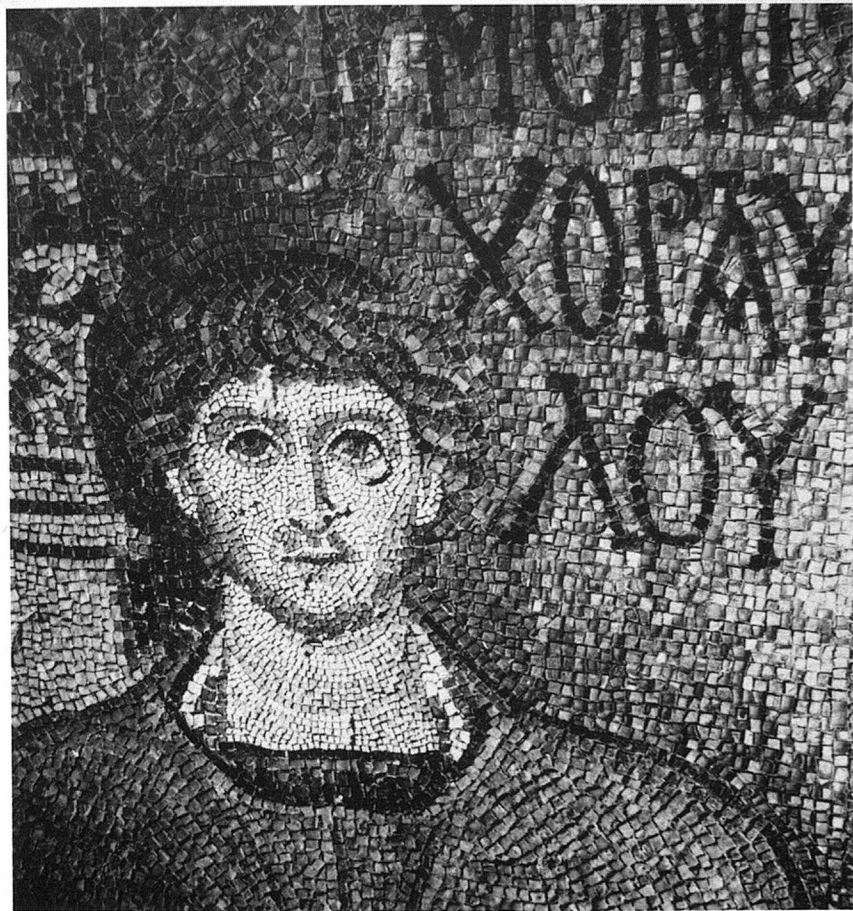
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Pl. 17



*Pl. 18*



*Pl. 19*





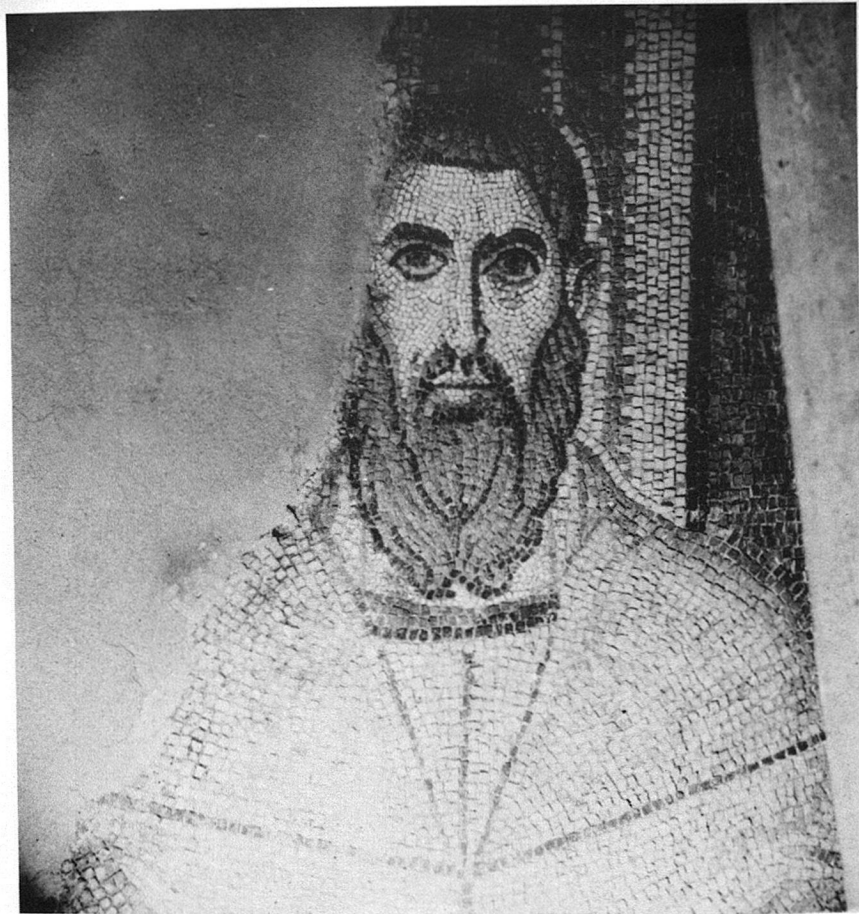
*Pl. 20*



*Pl. 21*



*Pl. 22*



*Pl. 23*





*Pl. 24*



*Pl. 25*

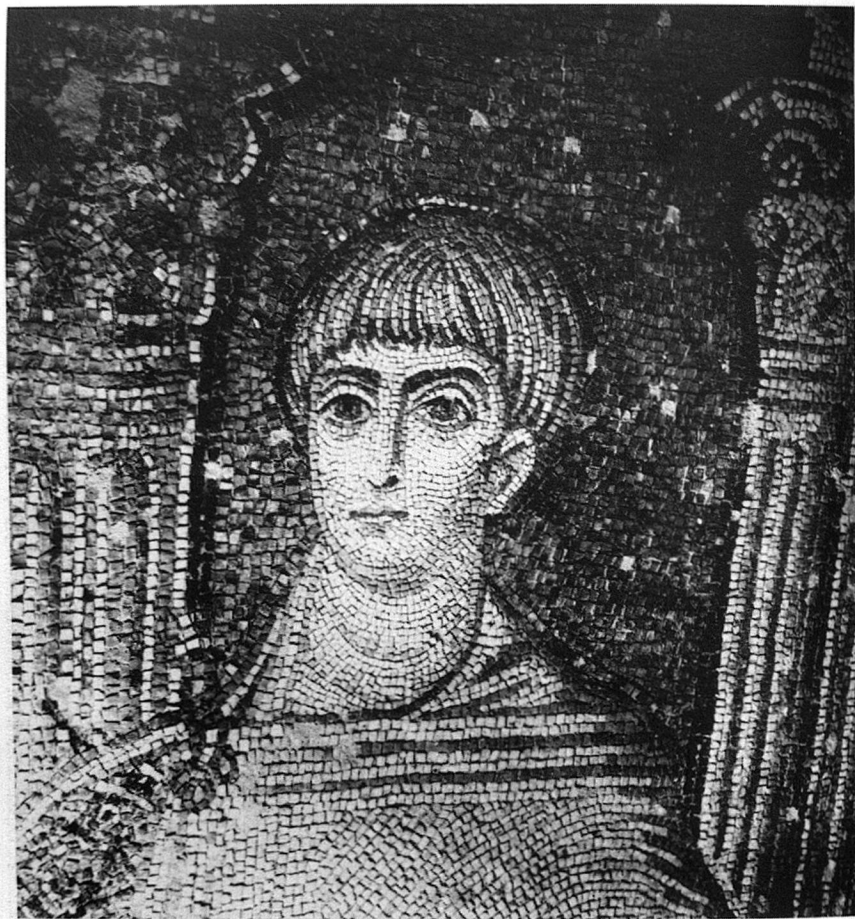


*Pl. 26*



*Pl. 27*

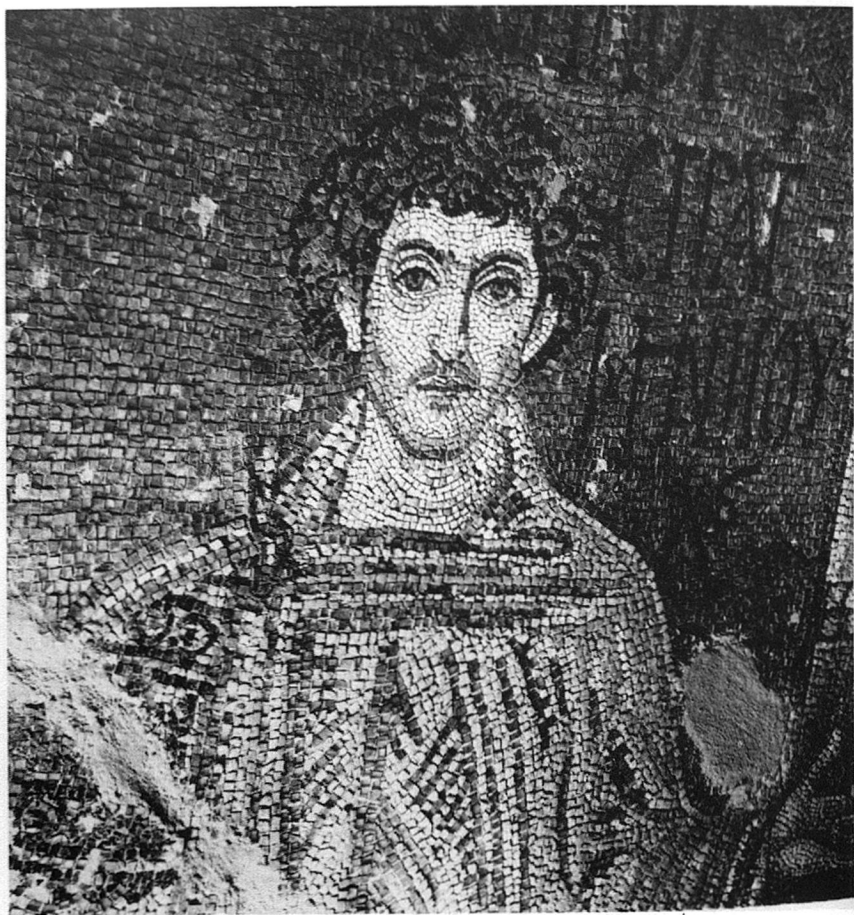




*Pl. 28*



*Pl. 29*



*Pl. 30*



*Pl. 31*

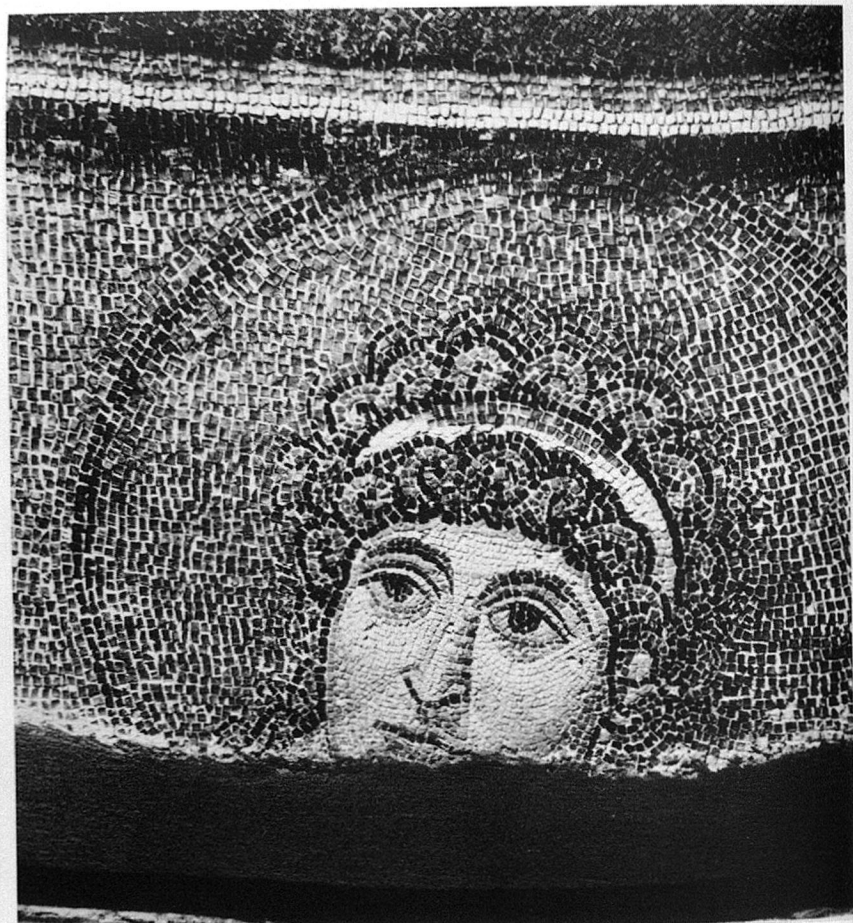




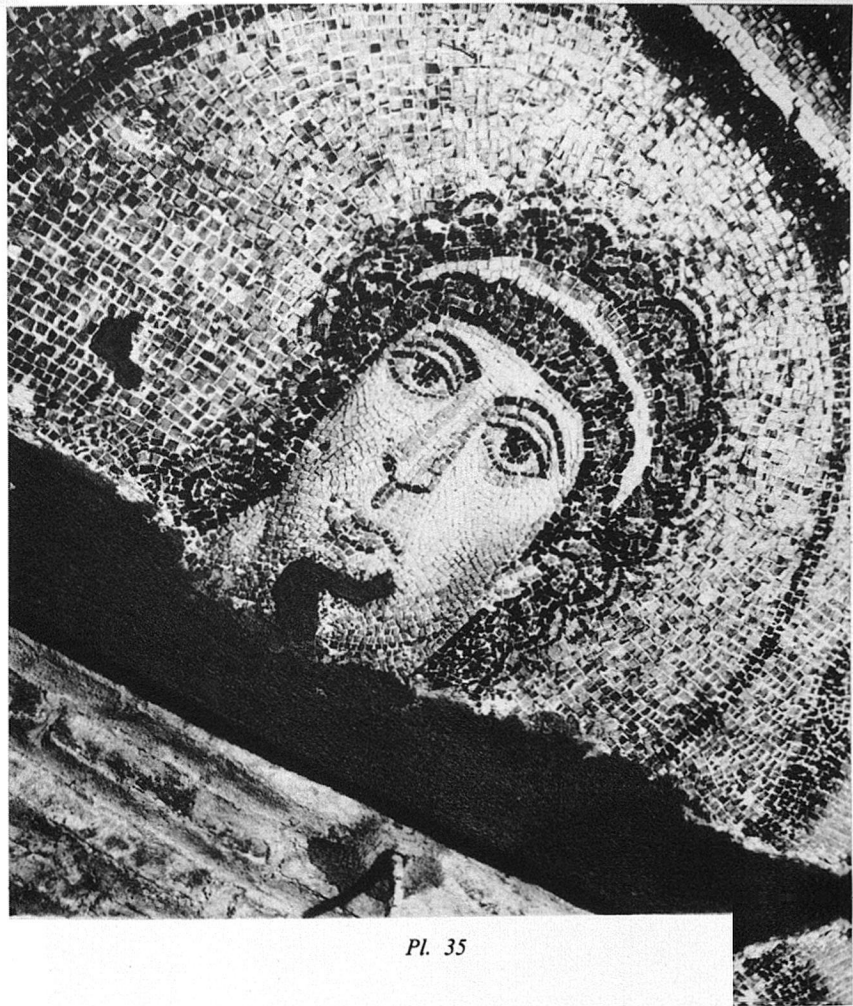
*Pl. 32*



*Pl. 33*

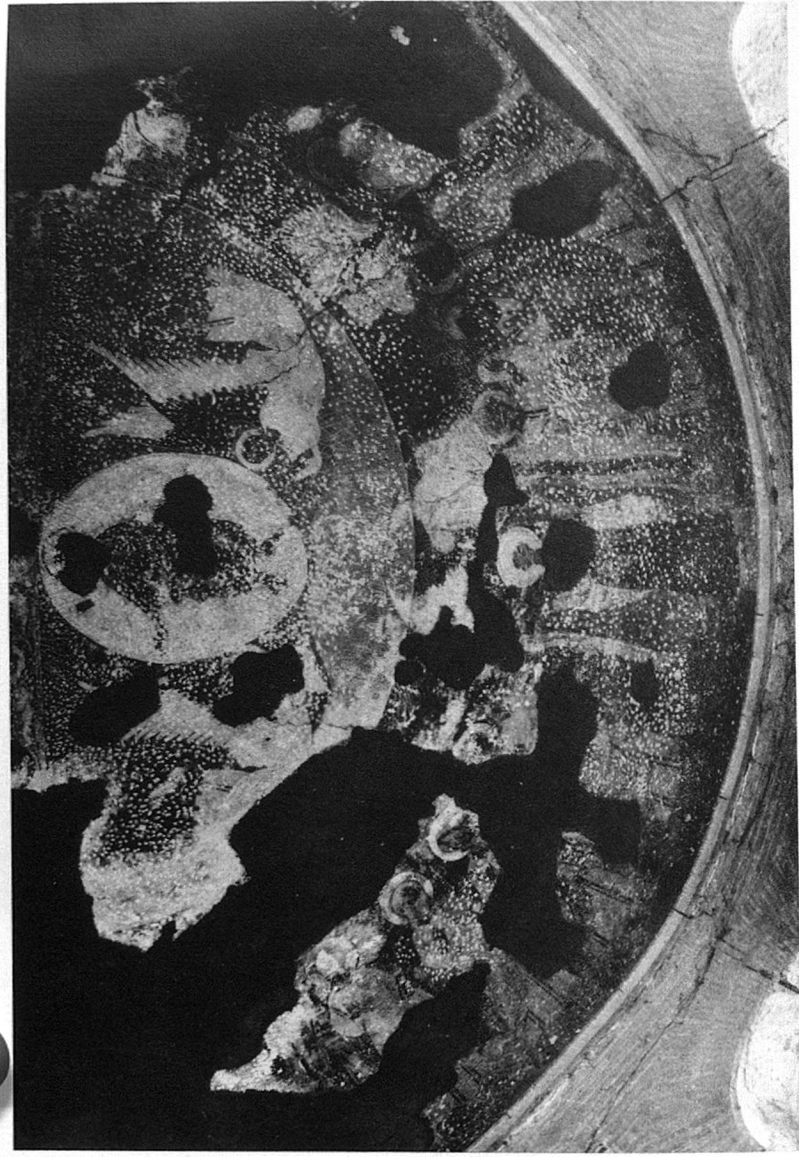


*Pl. 34*



*Pl. 35*





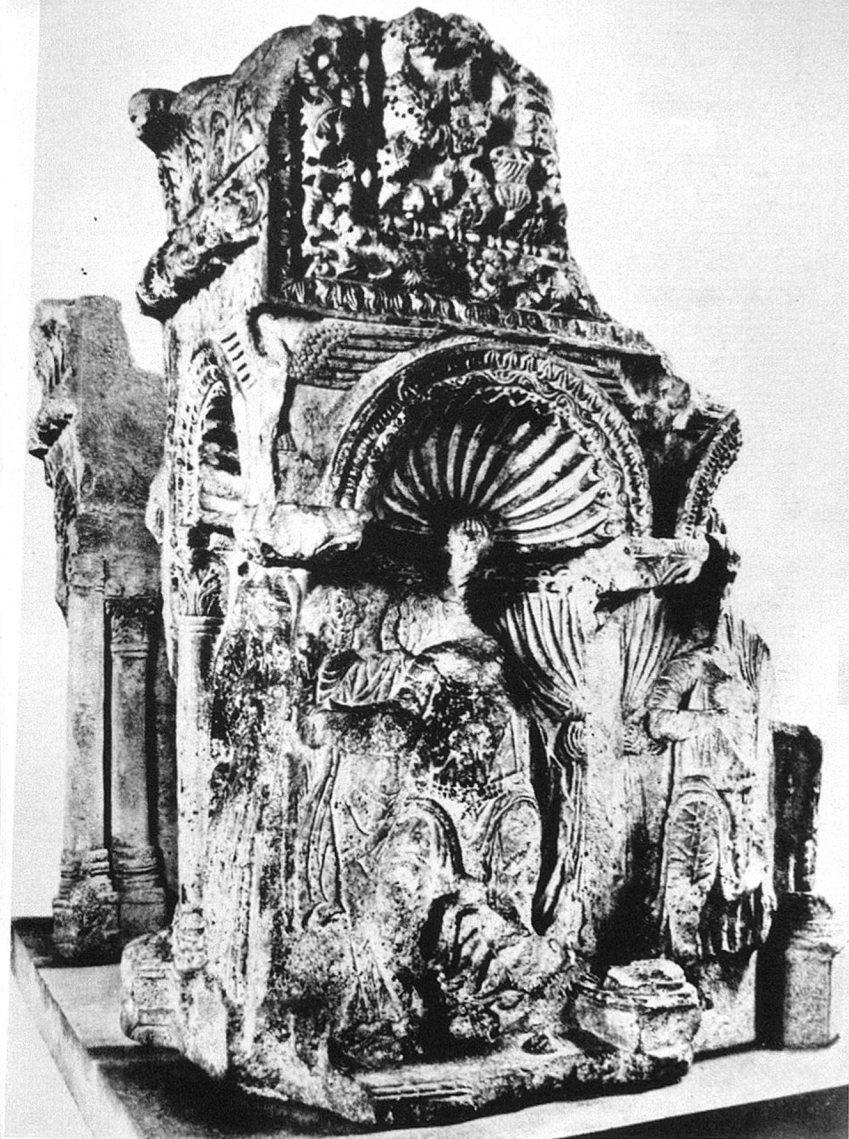
Pl. 36



Pl. 37

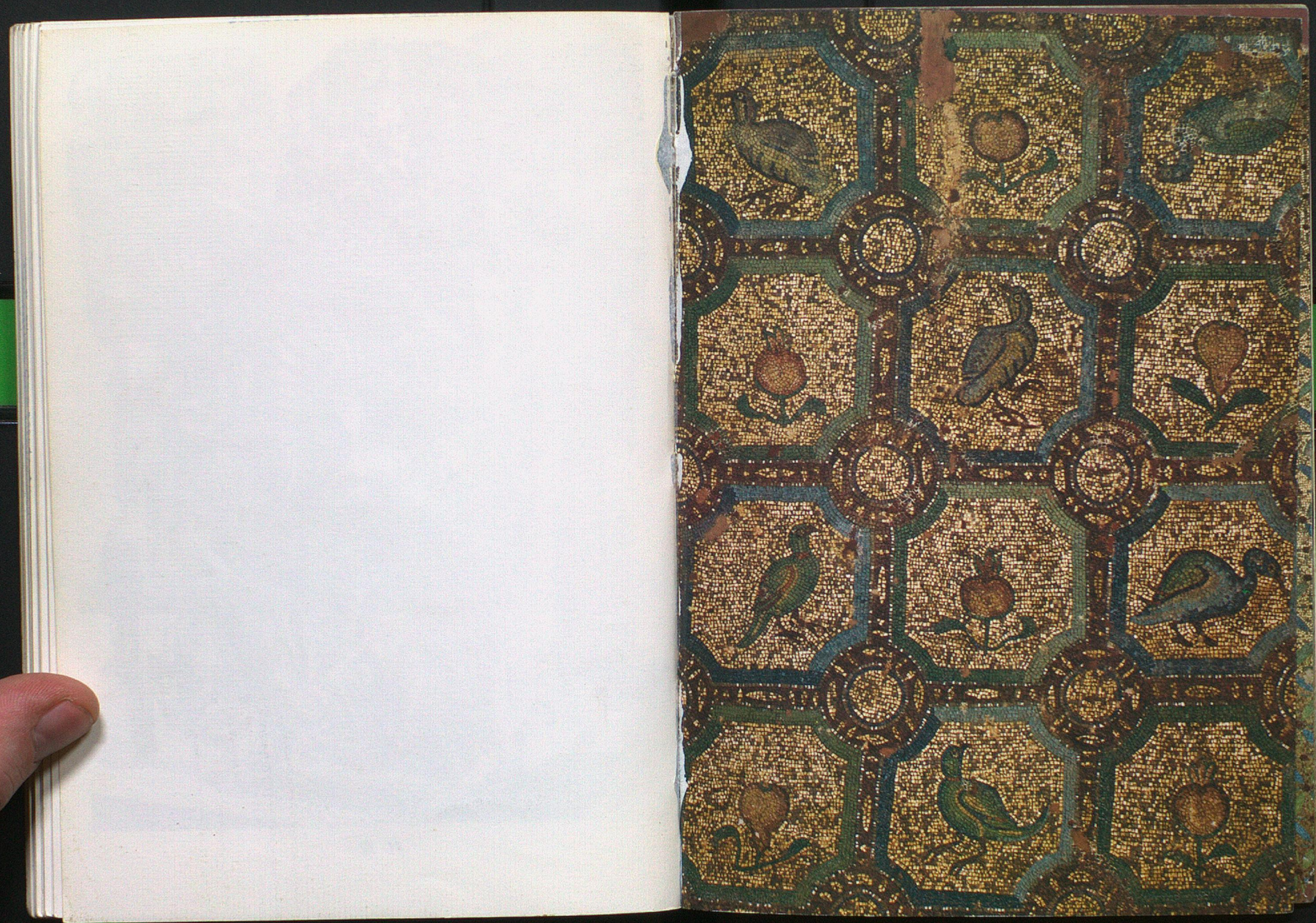


*Pl. 38*



*Pl. 39*











*I. Vault mosaic from the south-eastern bay, detail.*







I. Vault mosaic from the southern bay, detail.



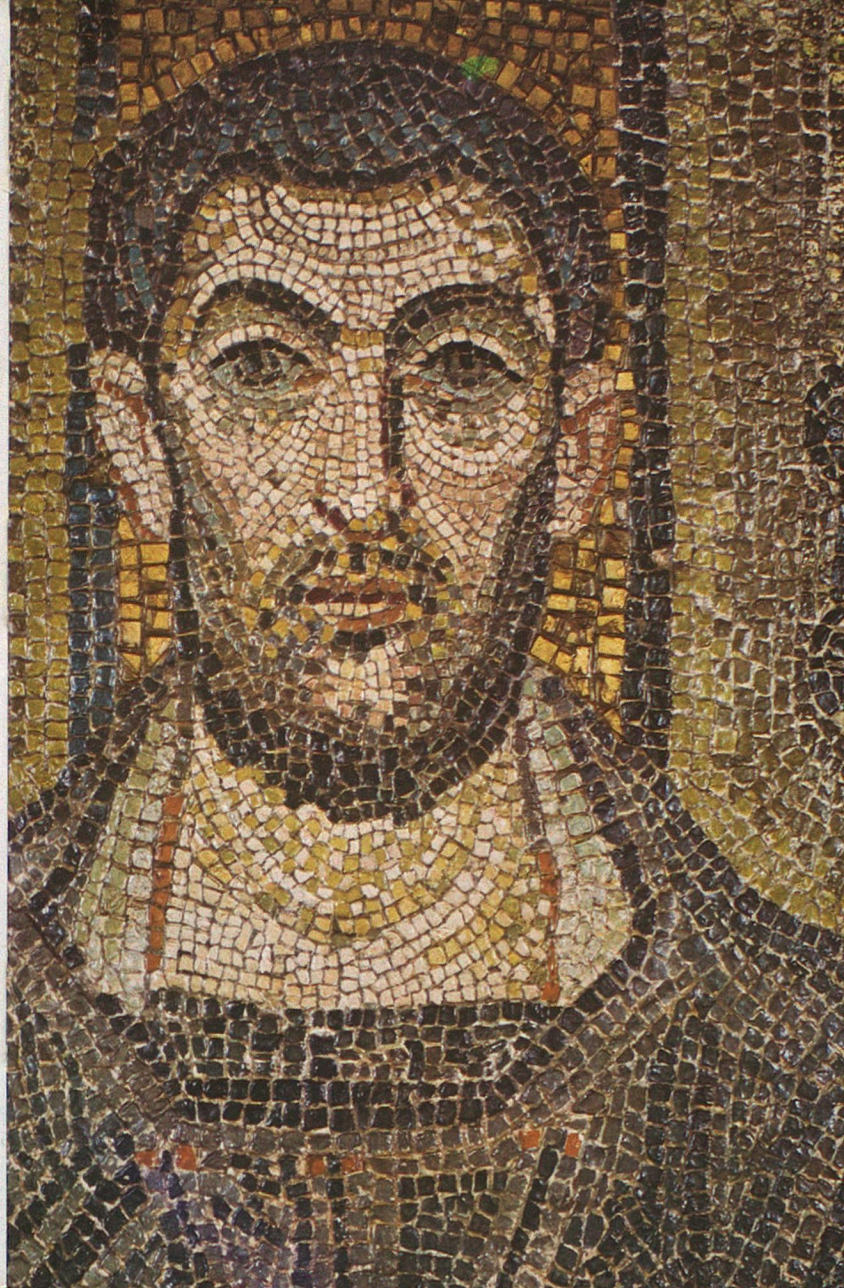


III. Vault mosaic from the western bay, detail.



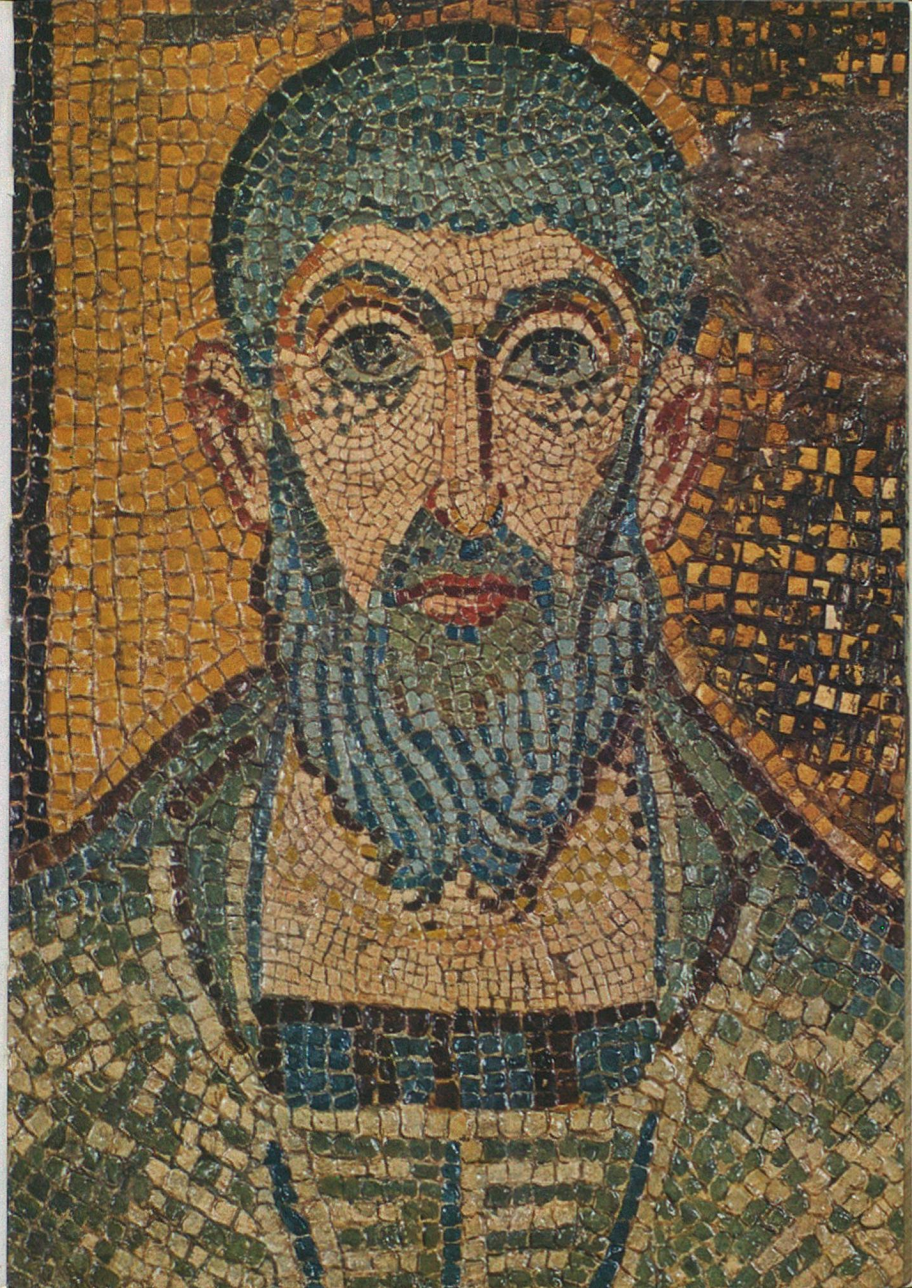






7. Dome mosaic, detail: St. Priscus.





VI. Dome mosaic, detail: St. Ananias.







VII. *III. Clipeus of dome with "Glory" of Christ supported by four angels.*